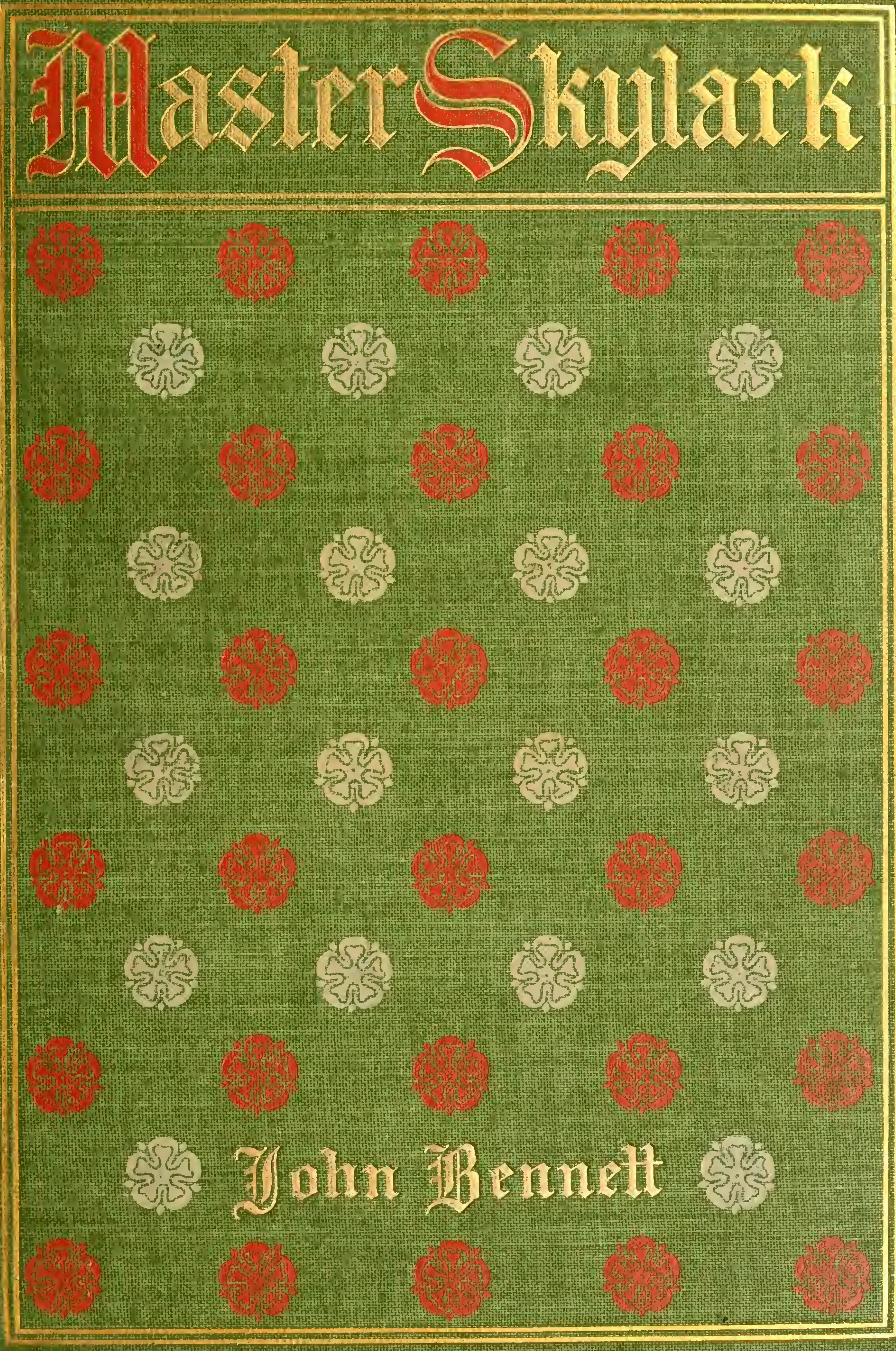
Master Skylark



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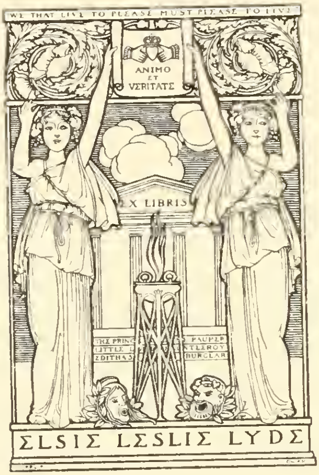
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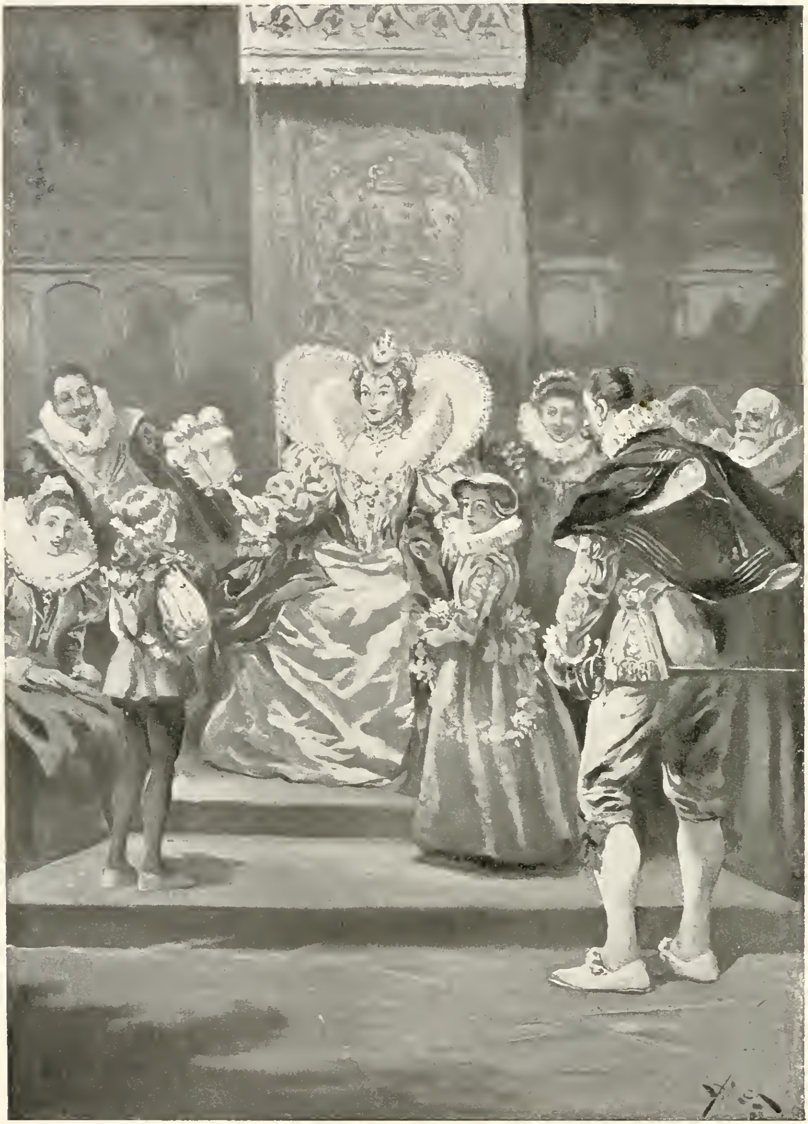
MASTER SKYLARK

* W. F.C. Clarke, William Fayal.
b. Richmond. Va. Longtime associate of
Mrs Mary Mapes Dodge at "St Nicholas"
and its last editor. 1905-1927.
A devoted friend of Elsie Leslie's.

Dear Elsie —
You, who've shown our age
How one small child can rule the stage —
How a wee lass, with golden curls,
May be the girlish of girls
And yet (when playing in Fauntleroys)
Become the boyishest of boys —
Who, in your time, played many parts
That won the love of all our hearts —

Read, now, this story of old days
When "Master Shakspere" went his ways
Unheralded, all up and down,
Thro' Stratford lanes or London town,
And, greatest poet ever born,
Carried a heart that did not scorn
To help a little lad, forlorn.

So, here's to Shakspere, man of men!
And here's to "Nick"! And "Master Ben"!
And here's to you! And now, as then,
Let's join, whatever be our parts,
In Shakspere's — "Here's to all kind hearts!"



"'MASTER SKYLARK, THOU SHALT HAVE THY WISH,' SAID QUEEN ELIZABETH." (*See p.* 264.)

MASTER SKYLARK

A Story of
Shakspere's Time

BY

JOHN BENNETT

(1865-1956)

ILLUSTRATIONS BY REGINALD B. BIRCH

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1898

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ALL THAT NICHOLAS ATTWOOD'S MOTHER
WAS TO HIM, AND MORE, MY OWN MOTHER HAS BEEN TO ME
AND TO HER HERE I INSCRIBE THIS BOOK
WITH A NEVER-FAILING LOVE

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MASTER SKYLARK

MASTER SKYLARK

CHAPTER I

THE LORD ADMIRAL'S PLAYERS

THERE was an unwonted buzzing in the east end of Stratford on that next to the last day of April, 1596. It was as if some one had thrust a stick into a hive of bees and they had come whirling out to see.

The low stone guard-wall of old Clopton bridge, built a hundred years before by rich Sir Hugh, sometime Mayor of London, was lined with straddling boys, like strawberries upon a spear of grass, and along the low causeway from the west across the lowland to the town, brown-faced, barefoot youngsters sat beside the roadway with their chubby legs a-dangle down the mossy stones, staring away into the south across the grassy levels of the valley of the Stour.

Punts were poling slowly up the Avon to the bridge; and at the outlets of the town, where the streets came down to the waterside among the weeds, little knots of men and serving-maids stood looking into the south and listening.

Some had waited for an hour, some for two; yet still there was no sound but the piping of the birds in white-thorn hedges, the hollow lowing of kine knee-deep in grassy meadows, and the long rush of the river through the sedge beside the pebbly shore; and naught to see but quiet valleys, primrose lanes, and Warwick orchards white with bloom, stretching away to the misty hills.

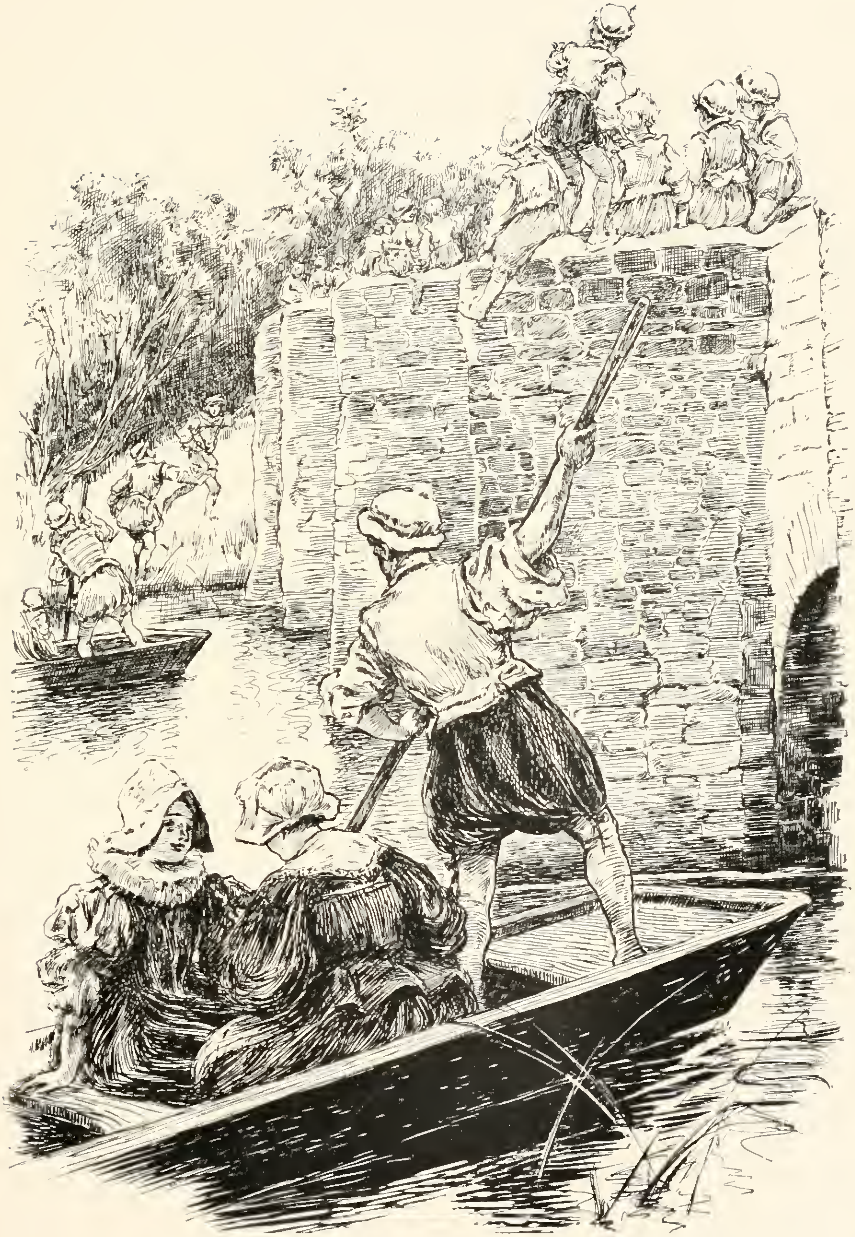
But still they stood and looked and listened.

The wind came stealing up out of the south, soft and warm and sweet and still, moving the ripples upon the river with gray gusts; and, scudding free before the wind, a dog came trotting up the road with wet pink tongue and sidelong gait. At the throat of Clopton bridge he stopped and scanned the way with dubious eye, then clapped his tail between his legs and bolted for the town. The laughing shout that followed him into the Warwick road seemed not to die away, but to linger in the air like the drowsy hum of bees—a hum that came and went at intervals upon the shifting wind, and grew by littles, taking body till it came unbroken as a long, low, distance-muffled murmur from the south, so faint as scarcely to be heard.

Nick Attwood pricked his keen young ears. "They 're coming, Robin—hark 'e to the trampling!"

Robin Getley held his breath and turned his ear toward the south. The far-off murmur was a mutter now, defined and positive, and, as the two friends listened, grew into a drumming roll, and all at once above it came a shrill, high sound like the buzzing of a gnat close by the ear.

Little Tom Davenant dropped from the finger-post, and



"PUNTS WERE POLING SLOWLY UP THE AVON TO THE BRIDGE."

came running up from the fork of the Banbury road, his feet making little white puffs in the dust as he flew. "They are coming! they are coming!" he shrieked as he ran.

Then up to his feet sprang Robin Getley, upon the saddle-backed coping-stones, his hand upon Nick Attwood's head to steady himself, and looked away where the rippling Stour ran like a thread of silver beside the dust-buff London road, and the little church of Atherstone stood blue against the rolling Cotswold Hills.

"They are coming! they are coming!" shrilled little Tom, and scrambled up the coping like a squirrel up a rail.

A stir ran out along the guard-wall, some crying out, some starting up. "Sit down! sit down!" cried others, peering askance at the water gurgling green down below. "Sit down, or we shall all be off!"

Robin held his hand above his eyes. A cloud of dust was rising from the London road and drifting off across the fields like smoke when the old ricks burn in damp weather—a long, broad-sheeted mist; and in it were bits of moving gold, shreds of bright colors vaguely seen, and silvery gleams like the glitter of polished metal in the sun. And as he looked the shifty wind came down out of the west again and whirled the cloud of dust away, and there he saw a long line of men upon horses coming at an easy canter up the highway. Just as he had made this out the line came rattling to a stop, the distant drumming of hoofs was still, and as the long file knotted itself into a rosette of ruddy color amid the April green, a clear, shrill trumpet blew and blew again.

"They are coming!" shouted Robin, "they are coming!" and, turning, waved his cap.

A shout went up along the bridge. Those down below came clambering up, the punts came poling with a rush of foam, and a ripple ran along the edge of Stratford town like the wind through a field of wheat. Windows creaked and doors swung wide, and the workmen stopped in the garden-plots to lean upon their mattocks and to look.

"They are coming!" bellowed Rafe Hickathrift, the butcher's boy, standing far out in the street, with his red hands to his mouth for a trumpet, "they are coming!" and at that the doors of Bridge street grew alive with eager eyes.

At early dawn the Oxford carrier had brought the news that the players of the Lord High Admiral were coming up to Stratford out of London from the south, to play on May-day there; and this was what had set the town to buzzing like a swarm. For there were in England then but three great companies, the High Chamberlain's, the Earl of Pembroke's men, and the stage-players of my Lord Charles Howard, High Admiral of the Realm; and the day on which they came into a Midland market-town to play was one to mark with red and gold upon the calendar of the uneventful year.

Away by the old mill-bridge there were fishermen angling for dace and perch; but when the shout came down from the London road they dropped their poles and ran, through the willows and over the gravel, splashing and thrashing among the rushes and sandy shallows, not to be last when the players came. And old John Carter, coming down the Warwick road with a load of hay, laid on the lash until piebald Dobbin snorted in dismay and broke into a lumbering run to reach the old stone bridge in time.

The distant horsemen now were coming on again, riding in double file. They had flung their banners to the breeze, and on the changing wind, with the thumping of horses' hoofs, came by snatches the sound of a kettledrummer drawing his drumhead tight, and beating as he drew, and the muffled blasts of a trumpeter proving his lips.

Fynes Morrison and Walter Stirley, who had gone to Cowslip lane to meet the march, were running on ahead, and shouting as they ran: "There 's forty men, and sumpter-mules! and, oh, the bravest banners and attire—and the trumpets are a cloth-yard long! Make room for us, make room for us, and let us up!"

A bowshot off, the trumpets blew a blast so high, so clear, so keen, that it seemed a flame of fire in the air, and as the brassy fanfare died away across the roofs of the quiet town, the kettledrums clanged, the cymbals clashed, and all the company began to sing the famous old song of the hunt:

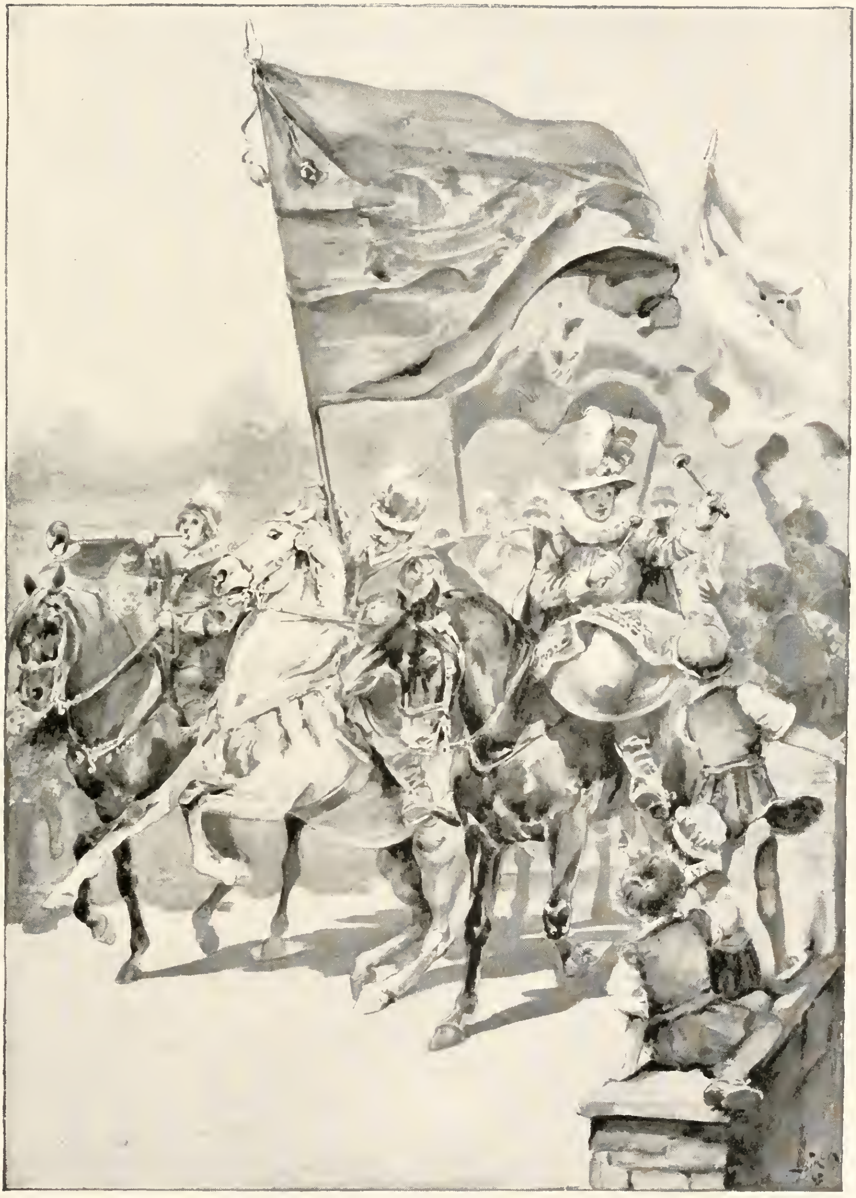
"The hunt is up, the hunt is up,
Sing merrily we, the hunt is up!
The wild birds sing,
The dun deer fling,
The forest aisles with music ring!
Tantara, tantara, tantara!

"Then ride along, ride along,
Stout and strong!
Farewell to grief and care;
With a rollicking cheer
For the high dun deer
And a life in the open air!
Tantara, the hunt is up, lads;
Tantara, the bugles bray!
Tantara, tantara, tantara,
Hio, hark away!"

The first of the riders had reached old Clopton bridge, and the banners strained upon their staves in the freshening river-wind. The trumpeters and the drummers led, their horses prancing, white plumes waving in the breeze, and the April sunlight dancing on the brazen horns and the silver bellies of the kettledrums.

Then came the banners of the company, curling down with a silky swish, and unfurling again with a snap, like a broad-lashed whip. The greatest one was rosy red, and on it was a gallant ship upon a flowing sea, bearing upon its mainsail the arms of my Lord Charles Howard, High Admiral of England. Upon its mate was a giant-bearded man with a fish's tail, holding a trident in his hand and blowing upon a shell, the Triton of the seas which England ruled; this flag was bright sea-blue. The third was white, and on it was a red wild rose with a golden heart, the common standard of the company.

After the flags came twoscore men, the players of the Admiral, the tiring-men, grooms, horse-boys, and serving-knaves, well mounted on good horses, and all of them clad



THE LORD ADMIRAL'S PLAYERS. "THE TRUMPETERS AND THE DRUMMERS LED, THEIR HORSES PRANCING, WHITE PLUMES WAVING IN THE BREEZE."

in scarlet tabards blazoned with the coat-armor of their master. Upon their caps they wore the famous badge of the Howards, a rampant silver demi-lion; and beneath their tabards at the side could be seen their jerkins of many-colored silk, their silver-buckled belts, and long, thin Spanish rapiers, slapping their horses on the flanks at every stride. Their legs were cased in high-topped riding-boots of tawny cordovan, with gilt spurs, and the housings of their saddles were of blue with the gilt anchors of the admiralty upon them. On their bridles were jingling bits of steel, which made a constant tinkling, like a thousand little bells very far away.

Some had faces smooth as boys and were quite young; and others wore sharp-pointed beards with stiff-waxed mustaches, and were older men, with a tinge of iron in their hair and lines of iron in their faces, hardened by the life they led; and some, again, were smooth-shaven, so often and so closely that their faces were blue with the beard beneath the skin. But, oh, to Nicholas Attwood and the rest of Stratford boys, they were a dashing, rakish, admirable lot, with the air of something even greater than lords, and a keen knowingness in their sparkling, worldly eyes that made a common wise man seem almost a fool beside them!

And so they came riding up out of the south:

"Then ride along, ride along,
Stout and strong!
    Farewell to grief and care;
With a rollicking cheer
For the high dun deer
    And a life in the open air!"

"Hurrah! hurrah! God save the Queen!"

A dropping shout went up the street like an arrow-flight scattering over the throng; and the players, waving their scarlet caps until the long line tossed like a poppy-garden in a summer rain, gave a cheer that fairly set the crockery to dancing upon the shelves of the stalls in Middle Row.

"Hurrah!" shouted Nicholas Attwood, his blue eyes shining with delight. "Hurrah, hurrah, for the Admiral's men!" And high in the air he threw his cap, as a wild cheer broke from the eddying crowd, and the arches of the long gray bridge rang hollow with the tread of hoofs. Whiff, came the wind; down dropped the hat upon the very saddle-peak of one tall fellow riding along among the rest. Catching it quickly as it fell, he laughed and tossed it back; and when Nick caught it whirling in the air, a shilling jingled from it to the ground.

Then up Fore Bridge street they all trooped after into Stratford town.

"Oh," cried Robin, "it is brave, brave!"

"Brave?" cried Nick. "It makes my very heart jump. And see, Robin, 't is a shilling, a real silver shilling—oh, what fellows they all be! Hurrah for the Lord High Admiral's men!"

CHAPTER II

NICHOLAS ATTWOOD'S HOME

NICK Attwood's father came home that night bitterly wroth.

The burgesses of the town council had ordered him to build a chimney upon his house, or pay ten shillings fine; and shillings were none too plenty with Simon Attwood, the tanner of Old Town.

"Soul and body o' man!" said he, "they talk as if they owned the world, and a man could na live upon it save by their leave. I must build my fire in a pipe, or pay ten shillings fine? Things ha' come to a pretty pass—a pretty pass, indeed!" He kicked the rushes that were strewn upon the floor, and ground the clay with his heel. "This litter will ha' to be all took out. Atkins will be here at six i' the morning to do the job, and a lovely mess he will make o' the house!"

"Do na fret thee, Simon," said Mistress Attwood, gently. "The rushes need a changing, and I ha' pined this long while to lay the floor wi' new clay from Shottery common. 'T is the sweetest earth! Nick shall take the hangings down, and right things up when the chimley 's done."

So at cockcrow next morning Nick slipped out of his straw bed, into his clothes, and down the winding stair, while his parents were still asleep in the loft, and, sousing his head in the bucket at the well, began his work before the old town clock in the chapel tower had yet struck four.

The rushes had not been changed since Easter, and were full of dust and grease from the cooking and the table. Even the fresher sprigs of mint among them smelled stale and old. When they were all in the barrow, Nick sighed with relief and wiped his hands upon the dripping grass.

It had rained in the night,—a soft, warm rain,—and the air was full of the smell of the apple-bloom and pear from the little orchard behind the house. The bees were already humming about the straw-bound hives along the garden wall, and a misguided green woodpecker clung upside down to the eaves, and thumped at the beams of the house.

It was very still there in the gray of the dawn. He could hear the rush of the water through the sedge in the mill-race, and then, all at once, the roll of the wheel, the low rumble of the mill-gear, and the cool whisper of the wind in the willows.

When he went back into the house again the painted cloths upon the wall seemed dingier than ever compared with the clean, bright world outside. The sky-blue coat of the Prodigal Son was brown with the winter's smoke; the Red Sea towered above Pharaoh's ill-starred host like an inky mountain; and the homely maxims on the next breadth—"Do no Wrong," "Beware of Sloth," "Overcome Pride," and "Keep an Eye on the Pence"—could scarcely be read.

Nick jumped up on the three-legged stool and began to take them down. The nails were crooked and jammed in the wall, and the last came out with an unexpected jerk. Losing his balance, Nick caught at the table-board which leaned against the wall; but the stool capsized, and he came down on the floor with such a flap of tapestry that the ashes flew out all over the room.

He sat up dazed, and rubbed his elbows, then looked around and began to laugh.

He could hear heavy footsteps overhead. A door opened, and his father's voice called sternly from the head of the stair: "What madcap folly art thou up to now?"

"I be up to no folly at all," said Nick, "but down, sir. I fell from the stool. There 's no harm done."

"Then be about thy business," said Attwood, coming slowly down the stairs.

He was a gaunt man, smelling of leather and untanned hides. His short iron-gray hair grew low down upon his forehead, and his hooked nose, grim wide mouth, and heavy under jaw gave him a look at once forbidding and severe. His doublet of serge and his fustian hose were stained with liquor from the vats, and his eyes were heavy with sleep.

The smile faded from Nick's face. "Shall I throw the rushes into the street, sir?"

"Nay; take them to the muck-hill. The burgesses ha' made a great to-do about folk throwing trash into the highways. Soul and body o' man!" he growled, "a man must ask if he may breathe. And good hides going a-begging, too!"

Nick hurried away, for he dreaded his father's sullen moods.

The swine were squealing in their styes, the cattle bawled about the straw-thatched barns in Chapel lane, and long files of gabbling ducks waddled hurriedly down to the river through the primroses under the hedge. He could hear the milkmaids calling in the meadows; and when he trundled slowly home the smoke was creeping up in pale-blue threads from the draught-holes in the wall.

The tanner's house stood a little back from the thoroughfare, in that part of Stratford-on-Avon where the south end of Church street turns from Bull lane toward the river. It was roughly built of timber and plaster, the black beams showing through the yellow lime in curious squares and triangles. The roof was of red tiles, and where the spreading elms leaned over it the peaked gable was green with moss.

At the side of the house was a garden of lettuce; beyond the garden a rough wall on which the grass was growing. Sometimes wild primroses grew on top of this wall, and once a yellow daffodil. Beyond the wall were other gardens owned by thrifty neighbors, and open lands in common to them all, where foot-paths wandered here and there in a free, haphazard way.

Behind the house was a well and a wood-pile, and along the lane ran a whitewashed paling fence with a little gate, from which the path went up to the door through rows of bright, old-fashioned flowers.

Nick's mother was getting the breakfast. She was a gentle woman with a sweet, kind face, and a little air of quiet dignity that made her doubly dear to Nick by contrast with his father's unkempt ways. He used to think that, in her worsted gown, with its falling collar of Antwerp linen, and a soft, silken coif upon her fading hair, she was the most beautiful woman in all the world.

She put one arm about his shoulders, brushed back his curly hair, and kissed him on the forehead.

"Thou art mine own good little son," said she, tenderly, "and I will bake thee a cake in the new chimley on the morrow for thy May-day feast."

Then she helped him fetch the trestles from the buttery, set the board, spread the cloth, and lay the wooden platters, pewter cups, and old horn spoons in place. Breakfast being ready, she then called his father from the yard. Nick waited deftly upon them both, so that they were soon done with the simple meal of rye-bread, lettuce, cheese, and milk.

As he carried away the empty platters and brought water and a towel for them to wash their hands, he said quietly, although his eyes were bright and eager, "The Lord High Admiral's company is to act a stage-play at the guildhall to-morrow before Master Davenant the Mayor and the town burgesses."

Simon Attwood said nothing, but his brows drew down.

"They came yestreen from London town by Oxford way to play in Stratford and at Coventry, and are at the Swan Inn with Master Geoffrey Inchbold—oh, ever so many of them, in scarlet jerkins, and cloth of gold, and doublets of silk laced up like any lord! It is a very good company, they say."

Mistress Attwood looked quickly at her husband. "What will they play?" she asked.

"I can na say surely, mother—'Tamburlane,' perhaps, or 'The Troublesome Reign of Old King John.' The play will be free, father—may I go, sir?"

"And lose thy time from school?"

"There is no school to-morrow, sir."

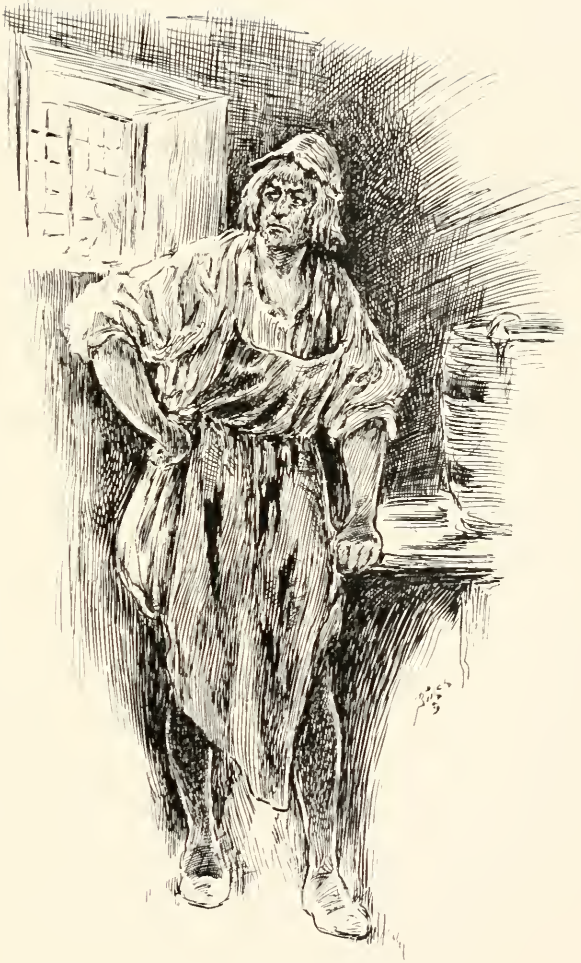
"Then have ye naught to do, that ye waste the day in idle folly?" asked the tanner, sternly.

"I will do my work beforehand, sir," replied Nick, quietly, though his hand trembled a little as he brushed up the crumbs.

"It is May-day, Simon," interceded Mistress Attwood, "and a bit of pleasure will na harm the lad."

"Pleasure?" said the tanner, sharply. "If he does na find pleasure enough in his work, his book, and his home, he shall na seek it of low rogues and strolling scapegraces."

"But, Simon," said Mistress Attwood, "'t is the Lord Admiral's own company—surely they are not all graceless! And," she continued with very quiet dignity, "since mine own cousin Anne Hathaway married Will Shakspere the



NICK ATTWOOD'S FATHER.

play-actor, 't is scarcely kind to call all players rogues and low."

"No more o' this, Margaret," cried Attwood, flushing angrily. "Thou art ever too ready with the boy's part against me. He shall na go—I 'll find a thing or two for him to do among the vats that will take this taste for idleness out of his mouth. He shall na go: so that be all there is on it." Rising abruptly, he left the room.

Nick clenched his hands.

"Nicholas," said his mother, softly.

"Yes, mother," said he; "I know. But he should na flout thee so! And, mother, the Queen goes to the play —father himself saw her at Coventry ten years ago. Is what the Queen does idle folly?"

His mother took him by the hand and drew him to her side, with a smile that was half a sigh. "Art thou the Queen?"

"Nay," said he; "and it 's all the better for England, like enough. But surely, mother, it can na be wrong—"

"To honour thy father?" said she, quickly, laying her finger across his lips. "Nay, lad; it is thy bounden duty."

Nick turned and looked up at her wonderingly. "Mother," said he, "art thou an angel come down out of heaven?"

"Nay," she answered, patting his flushed cheek; "I be only the every-day mother of a fierce little son who hath many a hard, hard lesson to learn. Now eat thy breakfast—thou hast been up a long while."

Nick kissed her impetuously and sat down, but his heart still rankled within him.

All Stratford would go to the play. He could hear the murmur of voices and music, the bursts of laughter and applause, the tramp of happy feet going up the guildhall stairs to the Mayor's show. Everybody went in free at the Mayor's show. The other boys could stand on stools and see it all. They could hold horses at the gate of the inn at the September fair, and so see all the farces. They could see the famous Norwich puppet-play. But he—what pleasure did he ever have? A tawdry pageant by a lot of clumsy country bumpkins at Whitsuntide or Pentecost, or a silly school-boy masque at Christmas, with the master scolding like a heathen Turk. It was not fair.

And now he 'd have to work all May-day. May-day out of all the year! Why, there was to be a May-pole and a morris-dance, and a roasted calf, too, in Master Wainwright's field, since Margery was chosen Queen of the May. And Peter Finch was to be Robin Hood, and Nan Rogers Maid Marian, and wear a kirtle of Kendal green—and, oh, but the May-pole would be brave; high as the ridge of the guildschool roof, and hung with ribbons like a rainbow! Geoffrey Hall was to lead the dance, too, and the other boys and girls would all be there. And where would he be? Sousing hides in the tannery vats. Truly his father was a hard man!

He pushed the cheese away.

CHAPTER III

THE LAST STRAW

LITTLE John Summer had a new horn-book that cost a silver penny. The handle was carven and the horn was clear as honey. The other little boys stood round about in speechless envy, or murmured their A B C's and "ba be bi's" along the chapel steps. The lower-form boys were playing leap-frog past the almshouse, and Geoffrey Gosse and the vicar's son were in the public gravel-pit, throwing stones at the robins in the Great House elms across the lane.

Some few dull fellows sat upon the steps behind the school-house, anxiously poring over their books. But the larger boys of the Fable Class stood in an excited group beneath the shadow of the overhanging second story of the grammar-school, talking all at once, each louder than the other, until the noise was deafening.

"Oh, Nick, such goings on!" called Robin Getley, whose father was a burgess, as Nick Attwood came slowly up the street, saying his sentences for the day over and over to himself in hopeless desperation, having had no time to learn them at home. "Stratford Council has had a quarrel, and there 's to be no stage-play after all."

"What?" cried Nick, in amazement. "No stage-play? And why not?"

"Why," said Robin, "it was just this way—my father told me of it. Sir Thomas Lucy, High Sheriff of Worcester, y' know, rode in from Charlcote yesternoon, and with him Sir Edward Greville of Milcote. So the burgesses made a feast for them at the Swan Inn. Sir Thomas fetched a fine, fat buck, and the town stood good for ninepence wine and twopence bread, and broached a keg of sturgeon. And when they were all met together there, eating, and drinking, and making merry—what? Why, in came my Lord Admiral's players from London town, ruffling it like high dukes, and not caring two pops for Sir Thomas, or Sir Edward, or for Stratford burgesses all in a heap; but sat them down at the table straightway, and called for ale, as if they owned the place; and not being served as soon as they desired, they laid hands upon Sir Thomas's server as he came in from the buttery with his tray full, and took both meat and drink."

"What?" cried Nick.

"As sure as shooting, they did!" said Robin; "and when Sir Thomas's gentry yeomen would have seen to it—what? Why, my Lord Admiral's master-player clapped his hand to his poniard-hilt, and dared them come and take it if they could."

"To Sir Thomas Lucy's men?" exclaimed Nick, aghast.

"Ay, to their teeth! Sir Edward sprang up then, and said it was a shame for players to behave so outrageously in Will Shakspere's own home town. And at that Sir Thomas, who, y' know, has always misliked Will, flared up like a bull at a red rag, and swore that all stage-players be runagate rogues, anyway, and Will Shakspere neither more nor less than a deer-stealing scape-gallows."

"Surely he did na say that in Stratford Council?" protested Nick.

"Ay, but he did—that very thing," said Robin; "and when that was out, the master-player sprang upon the table, overturning half the ale, and cried out that Will Shakspere was his very own true friend, and the sweetest fellow in all England, and that whosoever gainsaid it was a hemp-cracking rascal, and that he would prove it upon his back with a quarter-staff whenever and wherever he chose, be he Sir Thomas Lucy, St. George and the Dragon, Guy of Warwick, and the great dun cow, all rolled up in one!"

"Robin Getley, is this the very truth, or art thou cozening me?"

"Upon my word, it is the truth," said Robin. "And that 's not all. Sir Edward cried out 'Fie!' upon the player for a saucy varlet; but the fellow only laughed, and bowed quite low, and said that he took no offense from Sir Edward for saying that, since it could not honestly be denied, but that Sir Thomas did not know the truth from a truckle-bed in broad daylight, and was but the remnant of a gentleman to boot."

"The bold-faced rogue!"

"Ay, that he is," nodded Robin; "and for his boldness Sir Thomas straightway demanded that the High Bailiff refuse the company license to play in Stratford."

"Refuse the Lord High Admiral's players?"

"Marry, no one else. And then Master John Shakspere, wroth at what Sir Thomas had said of his son Will, vowed that he would send a letter down to London town, and lay the whole coil before the Lord High Admiral himself. For ever since that he was High Bailiff, the best companies of England had always been bidden to play in Stratford, and it would be an ill thing now to refuse the Lord Admiral's company after granting licenses to both my Lord Pembroke's and the High Chamberlain's."

"And so it would," spoke up Walter Roche; "for there are our own townsmen, Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, who are cousins of mine, and John Hemynge and Thomas Greene, besides Will Shakspere and his brother Edmund, all playing in the Lord Chamberlain's company in London before the Queen. It would be a black score against them all with the Lord Admiral—I doubt not he would pay them out."

"That he would," said Robin, "and so said my father and Alderman Henry Walker, who, y' know, is Will Shakspere's own friend. And some of the burgesses who cared not a rap for that were afeard of offending the Lord Admiral. But Sir Thomas vowed that my Lord Howard was at Cadiz with Walter Raleigh and the young Earl of Sussex, and would by no means hear of it. So Master Bailiff Stubbes, who, 't is said, doth owe Sir Thomas forty pound, and is therefore under his thumb, forthwith refused the company license to play in Stratford guildhall, inn-yard, or common. And at that the master-player threw his glove into Master Stubbes's face, and called Sir Thomas a stupid old bell-wether, and Stratford burgesses silly sheep for following wherever he chose to jump."

"And so they be," sneered Hal Saddler.

"How?" cried Robin, hotly. "My father is a burgess. Dost thou call him a sheep, Hal Saddler?"

"Nay, nay," stammered Hal, hastily; "'t was not thy father I meant."

"Then hold thy tongue with both hands," said Robin, sharply, "or it will crack thy pate for thee some of these fine days."

"But come, Robin," asked Nick, eagerly, "what became of the quarrel?"

"Well, when the master-player threw his glove into Master Stubbes's face, the Chief Constable seized him for contempt of Stratford Council, and held him for trial. At that some cried 'Shame!' and some 'Hurrah!' but the rest of the players fled out of town in the night, lest their baggage be taken by the law and they be fined."

"Whither did they go?" asked Nick, both sorry and glad to hear that they were gone.

"To Coventry, and left the master-player behind in gaol."

"Why, they dare na use him so—the Lord Admiral's own man!"

"Ay, that they don't! Why, hark 'e, Nick! This morning, since Sir Thomas has gone home, and the burgesses' heads have all cooled down from the sack and the clary they were in last night, la! but they are in a pretty stew, my father says, for fear that they have given offense to the Lord Admiral. So they have spoken the master-player softly, and given him his freedom out of hand, and a long gold chain to twine about his cap, to mend the matter with, beside."

"Whee-ew!" whistled Nick. "I wish I were a master-player!"

"Oh, but he will not be pleased, and says he will have his revenge on Stratford town if he must needs wait until the end of the world or go to the Indies after it. And he has had his breakfast served in Master Geoffrey Inchbold's own room at the Swan, and swears that he will walk the whole way to Coventry sooner than straddle the horse that the burgesses have sent him to ride."

"What! Is he at the inn? Why, let 's go down and see him."

"Master Brunswood says that he will birch whoever cometh late," objected Hal Saddler.

"Birch?" groaned Nick. "Why, he does nothing but birch! A fellow can na say his '*sum, es, est*' without catching it. And as for getting through the 'genitivo' and 'vocativo' without a downright threshing—" He shrugged his shoulders ruefully as he remembered his unlearned lesson. Everything had gone wrong with him that morning, and the thought of the birching that he was sure to get was more than he could bear. "I will na stand it any longer—I 'll run away!"

Kit Sedgewick laughed ironically. "And when the skies fall we 'll catch sparrows, Nick Attwood," said he. "Whither wilt thou run?"

Stung by his tone of ridicule, Nick out with the first thing that came into his head. "To Coventry, after the stage-players," said he, defiantly.

The whole crowd gave an incredulous hoot.

Nick's face flushed. To be crossed at home, to be birched at school, to work all May-day in the tannery vats, and to be laughed at—it was too much.

"Ye think that I will na? Well, I 'll show ye! 'T is only eight miles to Warwick, and hardly more than that beyond—no walk at all; and Diccon Haggard, my mother's cousin, lives in Coventry. So out upon your musty Latin—English is good enough for me this day! There 's bluebells blowing in the dingles, and cuckoo-buds no end. And while ye are all grinding at your old Æsop I shall be roaming over the hills wherever I please."

As he spoke he thought of the dark, wainscoted walls of the school-room with their narrow little windows overhead, of the foul-smelling floors of the tannery in Southam's lane, and his heart gave a great, rebellious leap. "Ay," said he, exultantly, "I shall be out where the birds can sing and the grass is green, and I shall see the stage-play, while ye will be mewed up all day long in school, and have nothing but a beggarly morris and a farthing May-pole on the morrow."

“Oh, no doubt, no doubt,” said Hal Saddler, mockingly. “We shall have but bread and milk, and thou shalt have —a most glorious threshing from thy father when thou comest home again!”

That was the last straw to Nick's unhappy heart.

“'T is a threshing either way,” said he, squaring his shoulders doggedly. “Father will thresh me if I run away, and Master Brunswood will thresh me if I don't. I 'll not be birched four times a week for merely tripping on a word, and have nothing to show for it but stripes. If I must take a threshing, I 'll have my good day's game out first.”

“But wilt thou truly go to Coventry, Nick?” asked Robin Getley, earnestly, for he liked Nick more than all the rest.

“Ay, truly, Robin—that I will”; and, turning, Nick walked swiftly away toward the market-place, never looking back.

CHAPTER IV

OFF FOR COVENTRY

AT the Bridge street crossing Nick paused irresolute. Around the public pump a chattering throng of housewives were washing out their towels and hanging them upon the market-cross to dry. Along the stalls in Middle Row the grumbling shopmen were casting up their sales from tallies chalked upon their window-ledges, or cuffing their tardy apprentices with no light hand.

John Gibson's cart was hauling gravel from the pits in Henley street to mend the causeway at the bridge, which had been badly washed by the late spring floods, and the fine sand dribbled from the cart-tail like the sand in an hour-glass.

Here and there loutish farm-hands waited for work; and at the corner two or three stout cudgel-men leaned upon their long staves, although the market was two days closed, and there was not a Coventry merchant in sight to be driven away from Stratford trade.

Goody Baker with her shovel and broom of twigs was sweeping up the market litter in the square. Nick wondered if his own mother's back would be so bent when she grew old.

"Whur be-est going, Nick?"

Roger Dawson sat astride a stick of timber in front of Master Geoffrey Thompson's new house, watching Tom Carpenter the carver cut fleur-de-lis and curling traceries upon the front wall beams. He was a tenant-farmer's son, this Roger, and a likely good-for-naught.

"To Coventry," said Nick, curtly.

"Wilt take a fellow wi' thee?"

Poor company might be better than none.

"Come on."

Roger lumbered to his feet and trotted after.

"No school to-day?" he asked.

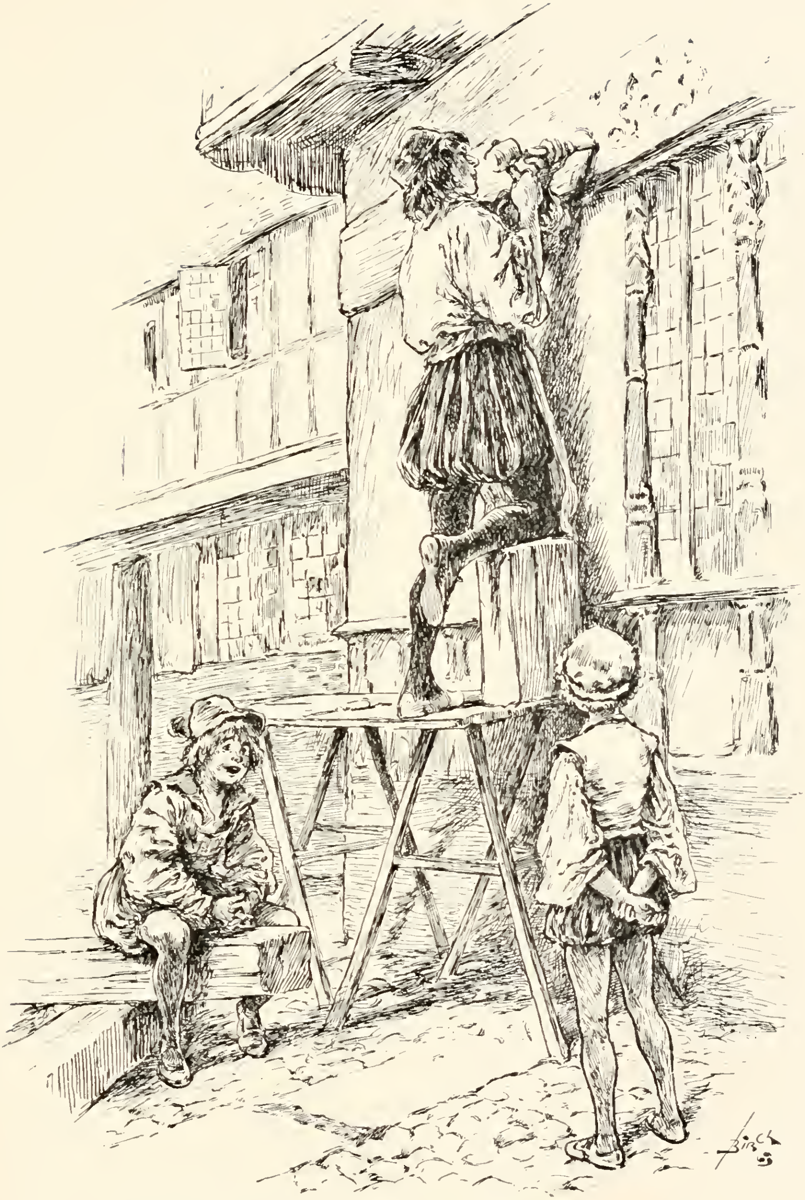
"Not for me," answered Nick, shortly, for he did not care to talk about it.

"Faither wull na have I go to school, since us ha' comed to town, an' plough-land sold for grazings," drawled Roger; "Muster Pine o' Welford saith that I ha' learned as much as faither ever knowed, an' 't is enow for I. Faither saith it maketh saucy rogues o' sons to know more than they's own dads."

Nick wondered if it did. His own father could neither read nor write, while he could do both and had some Latin, too. At the thought of the Latin he made a wry face.

"Joe Carter be-eth in the stocks," said Roger, peering through the jeering crowd about the pillory and post; "a broke Tom Samson's pate wi' 's ale-can yestreen."

But Nick pushed on. A few ruddy-faced farmers and



"'WHUR BE-EST GOING, NICK?' ASKED ROGER DAWSON."

drovers from the Red Horse Vale still lingered at the Boar Inn door and by the tap-room of the Crown; and in the middle of the street a crowd of salters, butchers, and dealers in hides, with tallow-smeared doublets and doubtful hose, were squabbling loudly about the prices set upon their wares.

In the midst of them Nick saw his father, and scurried away into Back Bridge street as fast as he could, feeling very near a sneak, but far from altering his purpose.

"Job Hortop," said Simon Attwood to his apprentice at his side, looking out suddenly over the crowd, "was that my Nick yonder?"

"Nay, master, could na been," said Job, stolidly; "Nick be-eth in school by now—the clock ha' struck. 'T was Dawson's Hodge and some like ne'er-do-well."

CHAPTER V

IN THE WARWICK ROAD

THE land was full of morning sounds as the lads trudged along the Warwick road together An ax rang somewhere deep in the woods of Arden; cart-wheels ruttled on the stony road; a blackbird whistled shrilly in the hedge, and they heard the deep-tongued belling of hounds far off in Fulbroke park.

Now and then a heron, rising from the river, trailed its long legs across the sky, or a kingfisher sparkled in his own splash. Once a lonely fisherman down by the Avon started a wild duck from the sedge, and away it went pattering up-stream with frightened wings and red feet running along the water. And then a river-rat plumped into the stream beneath the willows, and left a long string of bubbles behind him.

Nick's ill humor soon wore off as he breathed the fresh air, moist from lush meadows, and sweet from hedges pink and white with hawthorn bloom. The thought of being pent up on such a day grew more and more unbearable, and a blithe sense of freedom from all restraint blunted the prick of conscience.

"Why art going to Coventry, Nick?" inquired Roger, suddenly, startled by a thought coming into his wits like a child by a bat in the room.

"To see the stage-play that the burgesses would na allow in Stratford."

"Wull I see, too?"

"If thou hast eyes—the Mayor's show is free."

"Oh, feckins, wun't it be fine?" gaped Hodge. "Be it a tailors' show, Nick, wi' Herod the King, and a rope for to hang Judas? An' wull they set the world afire wi' a torch, an' make the earth quake fearful wi' a barrel full o' stones? Or wull it be Sin in a motley gown a-thumping the Black Man over the pate wi' a bladder full o' peasen—an' angels wi' silver wingses, an' saints wi' goolden hair? Or wull it be a giant nine yards high, clad in the beards o' murdered kings, like granny saith she used to see?"

"Pshaw! no," said Nick; "none of those old-fashioned things. These be players from London town, and I hope they 'll play a right good English history-play, like 'The Famous Victories of Henry Fift,' to turn a fellow's legs all goose-flesh!"

Hodge stopped short in the road. "La!" said he, "I 'll go no furder if they turn me to a goose. I wunnot be turned goose, Nick Attwood—an' a plague on all witches, says I!"

"Oh, pshaw!" laughed Nick; "come on. No witch in the world could turn thee bigger goose than thou art now. Come along wi' thee; there be no witches there at all."

"Art sure thou 'rt not bedaffing me?" hesitated Hodge.

"Good, then; I be na feared. Art sure there be no witches?"

"Why," said Nick, "would Master Burgess John Shakspere leave his son Will to do with witches?"

"I dunno," faltered Hodge; "a told Muster Robin Bowles it was na right to drownd 'em in the river."

Nick hesitated. "Maybe it kills the fish," said he; "and Master Will Shakspere always liked to fish. But they burn witches in London, Hodge, and he has na put a stop to it—and he 's a great man in London town."

Hodge came on a little way, shaking his head like an old sheep in a corner. "Wully Shaxper a great man?" said he. "Why, a's name be cut on the old beech-tree up Snitterfield lane, where 's uncle Henry Shaxper lives, an' 't is but poorly done. I could do better wi' my own whittle."

"Ay, Hodge," cried Nick; "and that 's about all thou canst do. Dost think that a man's greatness hangs on so little a thing as his sleight of hand at cutting his name on a tree?"

"Wull, maybe; maybe not; but if a be a great man, Nick Attwood, a might do a little thing passing well—so there, now!"

Nick pondered for a moment. "I do na know," said he, slowly; "heaps of men can do the little things, but parlous few the big. So some one must be bigging it, or folks would all sing very small. And he doeth the big most beautiful, they say. They call him the Swan of Avon."

"Avon swans be mostly geese," said Hodge, vacantly.

"Now, look 'e here, Hodge Dawson, don't thou be calling Master Will Shakspere goose. He married my own mother's cousin, and I will na have it."

"La, now," drawled Hodge, staring, "'t is nowt to me. Thy Muster Wully Shaxper may be all the long-necked fowls in Warrickshire for all I care. And, anyway, I 'd like to know, Nick Attwood, since when hath a been '*Muster* Shaxper'—that ne'er-do-well, play-actoring fellow?"

"Ne'er-do-well? It is na so. When he was here last summer he was bravely dressed, and had a heap of good gold nobles in his purse. And he gave Rick Hawkins, that 's blind of an eye, a shilling for only holding his horse."

"Oh, ay," drawled Hodge; "a fool and a's money be soon parted."

"Will Shakspere is no fool," declared Nick, hotly. "He 's made a peck o' money there in London town, and 's going to buy the Great House in Chapel lane, and come back here to live."

"Then a 's a witless azzy!" blurted Hodge. "If a 's so great a man amongst the lords and earlses, a 'd na come back to Stratford. An' I say a 's a witless loon—so there!"

Nick whirled around in the road. "And I say, Hodge Dawson," he exclaimed with flashing eyes, "that 't is a shame for a lout like thee to so miscall thy thousand-time betters. And what 's more, thou shalt unsay that, or I will make thee swallow thy words right here and now!"

"I 'd loike to see thee try," Hodge began; but the words were scarcely out of his mouth when he found himself stretched on the grass, Nick Attwood bending over him.

"There! thou hast seen it tried. Now come, take that back, or I will surely box thine ears for thee."

Hodge blinked and gaped, collecting his wits, which had scattered to the four winds. "Whoy," said he, vaguely, "if 't is all o' that to thee, I take it back."

Nick rose, and Hodge scrambled clumsily to his feet. "I 'll na go wi' thee," said he, sulkily; "I will na go whur I be whupped."

Nick turned on his heel without a word, and started on.

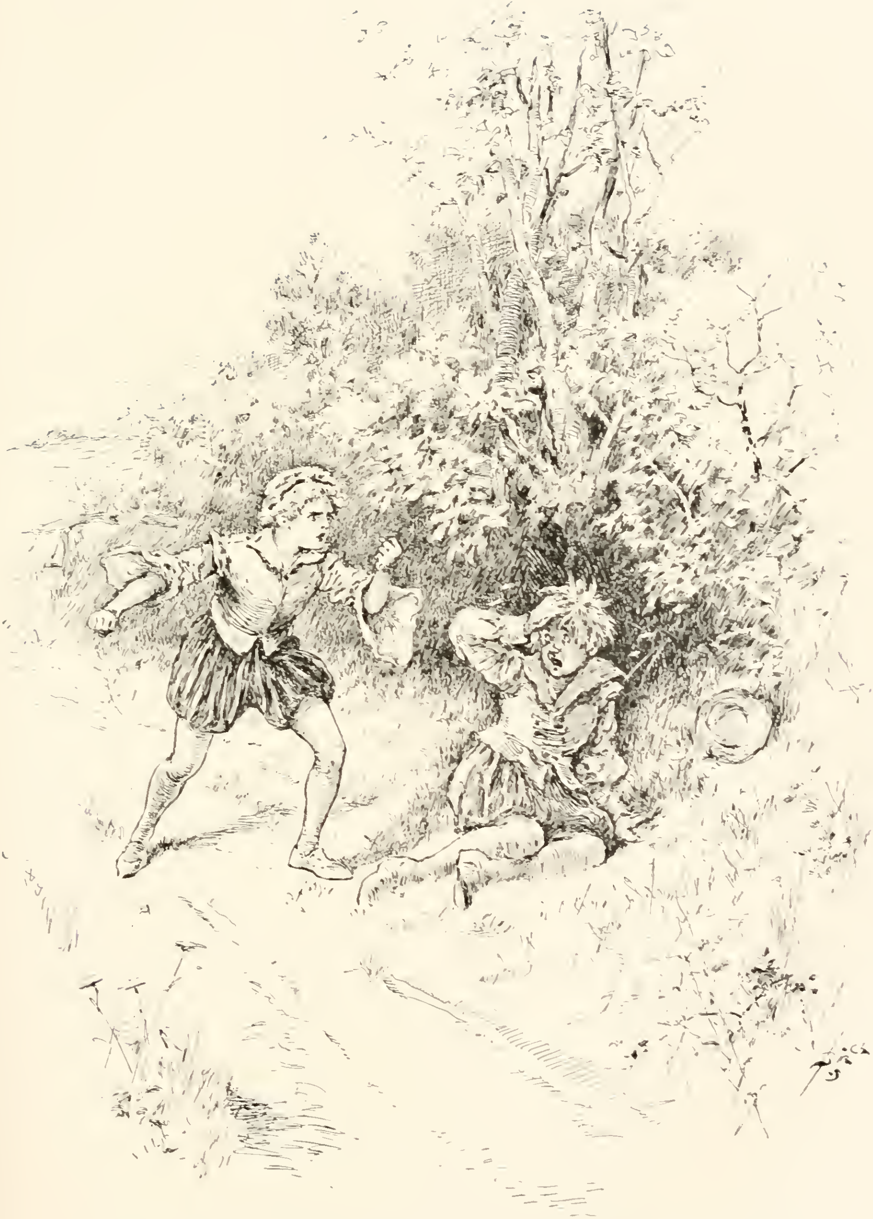
"An' what 's more," bawled Hodge after him, "thy Muster Wully Shaxper be-eth an old gray goose, an' boo to he, says I!"

As he spoke he turned, dived through the thin hedge, and galloped across the field as if an army were at his heels.

Nick started back, but quickly paused. "Thou needst na run," he called; "I 've not the time to catch thee now. But mind ye this, Hodge Dawson: when I do come back, I 'll teach thee who thy betters be—Will Shakspere first of all!"

"Well crowed, well crowed, my jolly cockerel!" on a sudden called a keen, high voice beyond the hedge behind him.

Nick, startled, whirled about just in time to see a stranger leap the hedge and come striding up the road.



"HODGE FOUND HIMSELF STRETCHED ON THE GRASS, NICK ATTWOOD BENDING OVER HIM."

CHAPTER VI

THE MASTER-PLAYER

HE had trim, straight legs, this stranger, and a slender, lithe body in a tawny silken jerkin. Square-shouldered, too, was he, and over one shoulder hung a plum-colored cloak bordered with gold braid. His long hose were the color of his cloak, and his shoes were russet leather, with rosettes of plum, and such high heels as Nick had never seen before. His bonnet was of tawny velvet, with a chain twisted round it, fastened by a jeweled brooch through which was thrust a curly cock-feather. A fine white Holland-linen shirt peeped through his jerkin at the throat, with a broad lace collar; and his short hair curled crisply all over his head. He had a little pointed beard, and the ends of his mustache were twisted so that they stood up fiercely on either side of his sharp nose. At his side was a long Italian poniard in a sheath of russet leather and silver filigree, and he had a reckless, high and mighty fling about his stride that strangely took the eye.

Nick stood, all taken by surprise, and stared.

The stranger seemed to like it, but scowled nevertheless.

"What! How now?" he cried sharply. "Dost like or like me not?"

"Why, sir," stammered Nick, utterly lost for anything to say—"why, sir,—" and knowing nothing else to do, he took off his cap and bowed.

"Come, come," snapped the stranger, stamping his foot, "I am a swashing, ruffling, desperate Dick, and not to be made a common jest for Stratford dolts to giggle at. What! These legs, that have put on the very gentleman in proud Verona's streets, laid in Stratford's common stocks, like a silly apprentice's slouching heels? Nay, nay; some one should taste old Bless-his-heart here first!" and with that he clapped his hand upon the hilt of his poniard, with a wonderful swaggering tilt of his shoulders. "Dost take me, boy?"

"Why, sir," hesitated Nick, no little awed by the stranger's wild words and imperious way, "ye surely are the master-player."

"There!" cried the stranger, whirling about, as if defying some one in the hedge. "Who said I could not act? Why, see, he took me at a touch! Say, boy," he laughed, and turned to Nick, "thou art no fool. Why, boy, I say I love thee now for this, since what hath passed in Stratford. A murrain on the town! Dost hear me, boy?—a black murrain on the town!" And all at once he made such a fierce stride toward Nick, gritting his white teeth, and clapping his hand upon his poniard, that Nick drew back afraid of him.

"But nay," hissed the stranger, and spat with scorn;

"a town like that is its own murrain—let it sicken on itself!"

He struck an attitude, and waved his hand as if he were talking quite as much to the trees and sky as he was to Nick Attwood, and looked about him as if waiting for applause. Then all at once he laughed,—a rollicking, merry laugh,—and threw off his furious manner as one does an old coat. "Well, boy," said he, with a quiet smile, looking kindly at Nick, "thou art a right stanch little friend to all of us stage-players. And I thank thee for it in Will Shakspere's name; for he is the sweetest fellow of us all."

His voice was simple, frank, and free—so different from the mad tone in which he had just been ranting that Nick caught his breath with surprise.

"Nay, lad, look not so dashed," said the master-player, merrily; "that was only old Jem Burbage's mighty tragic style; and I—I am only Gaston Carew, hail-fellow-well-met with all true hearts. Be known to me, lad; what is thy name? I like thy open, pretty face."

Nick flushed. "Nicholas Attwood is my name, sir."

"Nicholas Attwood? Why, it is a good name. Nick Attwood,—young Nick,—I hope Old Nick will never catch thee—upon my word I do, and on the remnant of mine honour! Thou hast taken a player's part like a man, and thou art a good fellow, Nicholas Attwood, and I love thee. So thou art going to Coventry to see the players act? Surely thine is a nimble wit to follow fancy nineteen miles. Come; I am going to Coventry to join my fellows. Wilt thou go with me, Nick, and dine with us this night at the best inn in all Coventry—the Blue Boar? Thou hast quite plucked up my downcast heart for me, lad, indeed thou hast; for I was sore of Stratford town—and I shall not soon forget thy plucky fending for our own sweet Will. Come, say thou wilt go with me."

"Indeed, sir," said Nick, bowing again, his head all in a whirl of excitement at this wonderful adventure, "indeed I will, and that right gladly, sir." And with heart beating like a trip-hammer he walked along, cap in hand, not knowing that his head was bare.

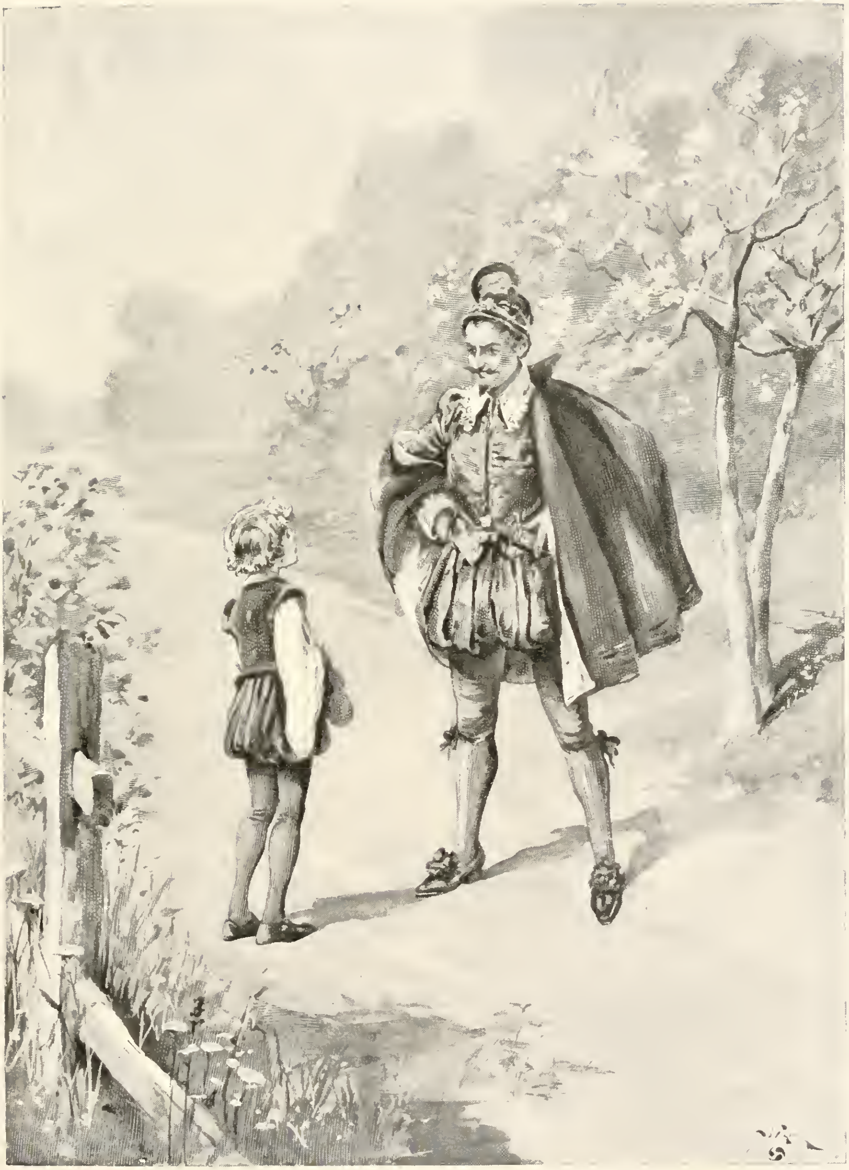
The master-player laughed a simple, hearty laugh. "Why, Nick," said he, laying his hand caressingly upon the boy's shoulder, "I am no such great to-do as all that—upon my word, I 'm not! A man of some few parts, perhaps, not common in the world; but quite a plain fellow, after all. Come, put off this high humility and be just friendly withal. Put on thy cap; we are but two good faring-fellows here."

So Nick put on his cap, and they went on together, Nick in the seventh heaven of delight.

About a mile beyond Stratford, Welcombe wood creeps down along the left. Just beyond, the Dingles wind irregularly up from the foot-path below to the crest of Welcombe hill, through straggling clumps and briery hollows, sweet with nodding bluebells, ash, and hawthorn.

Nick and the master-player paused a moment at the top to catch their breath and to look back.

Stratford and the valley of the Avon lay spread before them like a picture of peace, studded with blossoming



"'WHAT! HOW NOW?' CRIED THE STRANGER, SHARPLY. 'DOST LIKE OR LIKE ME NOT?'"

orchards and girdled with spring. Northward the forest of Arden clad the rolling hills. Southward the fields of Feldon stretched away to the blue knolls beyond which lay Oxford and Northamptonshire. The ragged stretches of Snitterfield downs scrambled away to the left; and on the right, beyond Bearley, were the wooded uplands where Guy of Warwick and Heraud of Arden slew the wild ox and the boar. And down through the midst ran the Avon southward, like a silver ribbon slipped through Kendal green, to where the Stour comes down, past Luddington, to Bidford, and away to the misty hills.

"Why," exclaimed the master-player—"why, upon my word, it is a fair town—as fair a town as the heart of man could wish. Wish? I wish 't were sunken in the sea, with all its pack of fools! Why," said he, turning wrathfully upon Nick, "that old Sir Thingumbob of thine, down there, called me a caterpillar on the kingdom of England, a vagabond, and a common player of interludes! Called me vagabond! Me! Why, I have more good licenses than he has wits. And as to Master Bailiff Stubbes, I have permits to play from more justices of the peace than he can shake a stick at in a month of Sundays!" He shook his fist wrathfully at the distant town, and gnawed his mustache until one side pointed up and the other down. "But, hark 'e, boy, I 'll have my vengeance on them all—ay, that will I, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour—or else my name 's not Gaston Carew!"

"Is it true, sir," asked Nick, hesitatingly, "that they despitefully handled you?"

"With their tongues, ay," said Carew, bitterly; "but not otherwise." He clapped his hand upon his poniard, and threw back his head defiantly. "They dared not come to blows—they knew my kind! Yet John Shakspere is no bad sort—he knoweth what is what. But Master Bailiff Stubbes, I ween, is a long-eared thing that brays for thistles. I 'll thistle him! He called Will Shakspere rogue. Hast ever looked through a red glass?"

"Nay," said Nick.

"Well, it turns the whole world red. And so it is with Master Stubbes. He looks through a pair of rogue's eyes and sees the whole world rogue. Why, boy," cried the master-player, vehemently, "he thought to buy my tongue! Marry, if tongues were troubles he has bought himself a peck! What! Buy my silence? Nay, he 'll see a deadly flash of silence when I come to my Lord the Admiral again!"

CHAPTER VII

"WELL SUNG, MASTER SKYLARK!"

IT was past high noon, and they had long since left Warwick castle far behind. "Nicholas," said the master-player, in the middle of a stream of amazing stories of life in London town, "there is Blacklow knoll." He pointed to a little hill off to the left.

Nick stared; he knew the tale: how grim old Guy de Beauchamp had Piers Gaveston's head upon that hill for calling him the Black Hound of Arden.

"Ah!" said Carew, "times have changed since then, boy, when thou couldst have a man's head off for calling thee a name—or I would have yon Master Bailiff Stubbes's head off short behind the ears—and Sir Thomas Lucy's too!" he added, with a sudden flash of anger, gritting his teeth and clenching his hand upon his poniard. "But, Nicholas, hast anything to eat?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

Master Carew pulled from his pouch some barley-cakes and half a small Banbury cheese, yellow as gold and with a keen, sharp savour. "'T is enough for both of us," said he, as they came to a shady little wood with a clear, mossy-bottomed spring running down into a green meadow with a mild noise, murmuring among the stones. "Come along, Nicholas; we 'll eat it under the trees."

He had a small flask of wine, but Nick drank no wine, and went down to the spring instead. There was a wild bird singing in a bush there, and as he trotted down the slope it hushed its wandering tune. Nick took the sound up softly, and stood by the wet stones a little while, imitating the bird's trilling note, and laughing to hear it answer timidly, as if it took him for some great new bird without wings. Cocking its shy head and watching him shrewdly with its beady eye, it sat, almost persuaded that it was only size which made them different, until Nick clapped his cap upon his head and strolled back, singing as he went.

It was only the thread of an old-fashioned madrigal which he had often heard his mother sing, with quaint words long since gone out of style and hardly to be understood, and between the staves a warbling, wordless refrain which he had learned out on the hills and in the fields, picked up from a bird's glad-throated morning-song.

He had always sung the plain-tunes in church without taking any particular thought about it; and he sang easily, with a clear young voice which had a full, flute-like note in it like the high, sweet song of a thrush singing in deep woods.

Gaston Carew, the master-player, was sitting with his back against an oak, placidly munching the last of the cheese, when Nick began to sing. He started, straightening up as if some one had called him suddenly out of a sound sleep, and, turning his head, listened eagerly.

Nick mocked the wild bird, called again with a mellow, warbling trill, and then struck up the quaint old madrigal with the bird's song running through it. Carew leaped to his feet, with a flash in his dark eyes. "My soul! my soul!" he exclaimed in an excited undertone. "It is not —nay, it cannot be—why, 't is—it is the boy! Upon my heart, he hath a skylark prisoned in his throat! *Well sung, well sung, Master Skylark!*" he cried, clapping his hands in real delight, as Nick came singing up the bank. "Why, lad, I vow I thought thou wert up in the sky somewhere, with wings to thy back! Where didst thou learn that wonder-song?"

Nick colored up, quite taken aback. "I do na know, sir," said he; "mother learned me part, and the rest just came, I think, sir."

The master-player, his whole face alive and eager, now stared at Nicholas Attwood as fixedly as Nick had stared at him.

It was a hearty little English lad he saw, about eleven years of age, tall, slender, trimly built, and fair. A gray cloth cap clung to the side of his curly yellow head, and he wore a sleeveless jerkin of dark-blue serge, gray homespun hose, and heelless shoes of russet leather. The white sleeves of his linen shirt were open to the elbow, and his arms were lithe and brown. His eyes were frankly clear and blue, and his red mouth had a trick of smiling that went straight to a body's heart.

"Why, lad, lad," cried Carew, breathlessly, "thou hast a very fortune in thy throat!"

Nick looked up in great surprise; and at that the master-player broke off suddenly and said no more, though such a strange light came creeping into his eyes that Nick, after meeting his fixed stare for a moment, asked uneasily if they would not better be going on.

Without a word the master-player started. Something had come into his head which seemed to more than fill his mind; for as he strode along he whistled under his breath and laughed softly to himself. Then again he snapped his fingers and took a dancing step or two across the road, and at last fell to talking aloud to himself, though Nick could not make out a single word he said, for it was in some foreign language.

"Nicholas," he said suddenly, as they passed the winding lane that leads away to Kenilworth—"Nicholas, dost know any other songs like that?"

"Not just like that, sir," answered Nick, not knowing what to make of his companion's strange new mood; "but I know Master Will Shakspere's 'Then nightly sings the staring owl, tu-who, tu-whit, tu-who!' and 'The ousel-cock so black of hue, with orange-tawny bill,' and then, too, I know the throstle's song that goes with it."

"Why, to be sure—to be sure thou knowest old Nick Bottom's song, for is n't thy name Nick? Well met, both song and singer—well met, I say! Nay," he said hastily, seeing Nick about to speak; "I do not care to hear thee talk. Sing me all thy songs. I am hungry as a wolf for songs. Why, Nicholas, I must have songs! Come, lift up that honeyed throat of thine and sing another song. Be not so backward; surely I love thee, Nick, and thou wilt sing all of thy songs for me."

He laid his hand on Nick's shoulder in his kindly way, and kept step with him like a bosom friend, so that Nick's heart beat high with pride, and he sang all the songs he knew as they walked along.

Carew listened intently, and sometimes with a fierce eagerness that almost frightened the boy; and sometimes he frowned, and said under his breath, "Tut, tut, that will not do!" but oftener he laughed without a sound, nodding his head in time to the lilting tune, and seeming vastly pleased with Nick, the singing, and last, but not least, with himself.

And when Nick had ended the master-player had not a word to say, but for half a mile gnawed his mustache in nervous silence, and looked Nick all over with a long and earnest look.

Then suddenly he slapped his thigh, and tossed his head back boldly. "I 'll do it," he said; "I 'll do it if I dance on air for it! I 'll have it out of Master Stubbes and canting Stratford town, or may I never thrive! My soul! it is the very thing. His eyes are like twin holidays, and he breathes the breath of spring. Nicholas, Nicholas Skylark,—Master Skylark,—why, it is a good name, in sooth, a very good name! I 'll do it—I will, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour!"

"Did ye speak to me, sir?" asked Nick, timidly.

"Nay, Nicholas; I was talking to the moon."

"Why, sir, the moon has not come yet," said Nick, staring into the western sky.

"To be sure," replied Master Carew, with a queer laugh. "Well, the silvery jade has missed the first act."

"Oh," cried Nick, reminded of the purpose of his long walk, "what will ye play for the Mayor's play, sir?"

"I don't know," replied Carew, carelessly; "it will all be done before I come. They will have had the free play this afternoon, so as to catch the pence of all the May-day crowd to-morrow."

Nick stopped in the road, and his eyes filled up with tears, so quick and bitter was the disappointment. "Why," he cried, with a tremble in his tired voice, "I thought the free play would be on the morrow—and now I have not a farthing to go in!"

"Tut, tut, thou silly lad!" laughed Carew, frankly; "am I thy friend for naught? What! let thee walk all the way to Coventry, and never see the play? Nay, on my soul! Why, Nick, I love thee, lad; and I 'll do for thee in the twinkling of an eye. Canst thou speak lines by heart? Well, then, say these few after me, and bear them in thy mind."

And thereupon he hastily repeated some half a dozen disconnected lines in a high, reciting tone.

"Why, sir," cried Nick, bewildered, "it is a part!"

"To be sure," said Carew, laughing, "it is a part—and a part of a very good whole, too—a comedy by young Tom Heywood, that would make a graven image split its sides with laughing; and do thou just learn that part, good Master Skylark, and thou shalt say it in to-morrow's play."

"What, Master Carew!" gasped Nick. "I—truly? With the Lord Admiral's players?"

"Why, to be sure!" cried the master-player, in great glee, clapping him upon the back. "Didst think I meant a parcel of dirty tinkers? Nay, lad; thou art just the very fellow for the part—my lady's page should be a pretty lad, and, soul o' me, thou art that same! And, Nick, thou shalt sing Tom Heywood's newest song. It is a pretty song; it is a lark-song like thine own."

Nick could hardly believe his ears. To act with the Lord Admiral's company! To sing with them before all Coventry! It passed the wildest dream that he had ever dreamed. What would the boys in Stratford say? Aha! they would laugh on the other side of their mouths now!

"But will they have me, sir?" he asked doubtfully.

"Have thee?" said Master Carew, haughtily. "If I say go, thou shalt go. I am master here. And I tell thee, Nick, that thou shalt see the play, and be the play, in part, and—well, we shall see what we shall see."

With that he fell to humming and chuckling to himself, as if he had swallowed a water-mill, while Nick turned ecstatic cart-wheels along the grass beside the road, until presently Coventry came in sight.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ADMIRAL'S COMPANY

THE ancient city of Coventry stands upon a little hill, with old St. Michael's steeple and the spire of Holy Trinity church rising above it against the sky; and as the master-player and the boy came climbing upward from the south, walls, towers, chimneys, and red-tiled roofs were turned to gold by the glow of the setting sun.

To Nick it seemed as if a halo overhung the town—a ruddy glory and a wonder bright; for here the Grey Friars of the great monastery had played their holy mysteries and miracle-plays for over a hundred years: here the trade-guilds had held their pageants when the friars' day was done; here were all the wonders that old men told by winter fires.

People were coming and going through the gates like bees about a hive, and in the distance Nick could hear the sound of many voices, the rush of feet, wheels, and hoofs, and the shrill pipe of music. Here and there were little knots of country folk making holiday: a father and mother with a group of rosy children; a lad and his lass, spruce in new finery, and gay with bits of ribbon—merry groups that were ever changing. Gay banners flapped on tall ash staves. The suburb fields were filled with booths and tents and stalls and butts for archery. The very air seemed eager with the eve of holiday.

But what to Nick was breathless wonder was to Carew only a twice-told tale; so he pushed through the crowded thoroughfares, amid a throng that made Nick's head spin round, and came quickly to the Blue Boar Inn.

The court was crowded to the gates with horses, travelers, and serving-men; and here and there and everywhere rushed the busy innkeeper, with a linen napkin fluttering on his arm, his cap half off, and in his hot hand a pewter flagon, from which the brown ale dripped in spatters on his fat legs as he flew.

"They 're here," said Carew, looking shrewdly about; "for there is Gregory Goole, my groom, and Stephen Magelt, the tire-man. In with thee, Nicholas."

He put Nick before him with a little air of patronage, and pushed him into the room.

It was a large, low chamber with heavy beams overhead, hung with leather jacks and pewter tankards. Around the walls stood rough tables, at which a medley of guests sat eating, drinking, dicing, playing at cards, and talking loudly all at once, while the tapster and the cook's knave sped wildly about.

At a great table in the midst of the riot sat the Lord High Admiral's players—a score or more loud-swashing gallants, richly clad in ruffs and bands, embroidered shirts, Italian doublets slashed and laced, Venetian hose, gay velvet caps with jeweled bands, and every man a poniard or a rapier at his hip. Nick felt very much like a little brown sparrow in a flock of gaudy Indian birds.

The board was loaded down with meat and drink, and some of the players were eating with forks, a new trick from the London court, which Nick had never seen before. But all the diners looked up when Carew's face was recognized, and welcomed him with a deafening shout.

He waved his hand for silence.

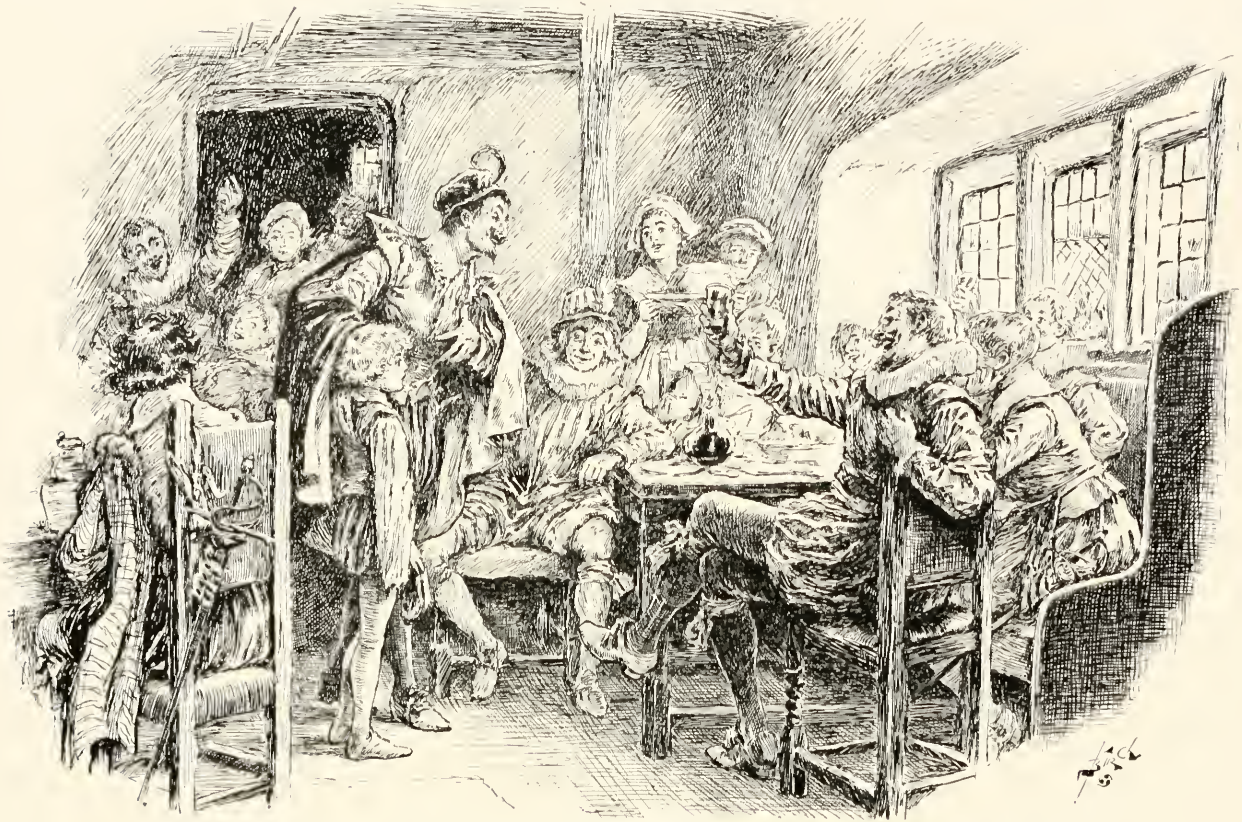
"Thanks for these kind plaudits, gentle friends," said he, with a mocking air; "I have returned."

"Yes; we see that ye have, Gaston," they all shouted, and laughed again.

"Ay," said he, thrusting his hand into his pouch, "ye fled, and left me to be spoiled by the spoiler, but ye see I have left the spoiler spoiled."

Lifting his hand triumphantly, he shook in their faces the golden chain that the burgesses of Stratford had given him, and then, laying his hand upon Nick's shoulder, bowed to them all, and to him with courtly grace, and said: "Be known, be known, all! Gentlemen, my Lord Admiral's Players, Master Nicholas Skylark, the sweetest singer in all the kingdom of England!"

Nick's cheeks flushed hotly, and his eyes fell; for they all stared curiously, first at him, and then at Carew standing up behind him, and several grinned mockingly and winked in a knowing way. He stole a look at Carew; but



"'MASTER NICHOLAS SKYLARK, THE SWEETEST SINGER IN ALL THE KINGDOM OF ENGLAND!'"

the master-player's face was frank and quite unmoved, so that Nick felt reassured.

"Why, sirs," said Carew, as some began to laugh and to speak to one another covertly, "it is no jest. He hath a sweeter voice than Cyril Davy's, the best woman's-voice in all London town. Upon my word, it is the sweetest voice a body ever heard—outside of heaven and the holy angels!" He lowered his tone and bowed his head a little. "I 'll stake mine honour on it!"

"Hast any, Gaston?" called a jeering voice, whereat the whole room roared.

But Carew cried again in a high voice that would be heard above the noise: "Now, hark 'e; what I say is so. It is, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour! And to-morrow ye shall see, for Master Skylark is to sing and play with us."

When he had said that, nothing would do but Nick must sit down and eat with them; so they made a place for him and for Master Carew.

Nick bent his head and said a grace, at which some of them laughed, until Carew shook his head with a stern frown; and before he ate he bowed politely to them all, as his mother had taught him to do. They all bowed mockingly, and hilariously offered him wine, which, when he refused, they pressed upon him, until Carew stopped them, saying that he would have no more of that. As he spoke he clapped his hand upon his poniard and scowled blackly. They all laughed, but offered Nick no more wine; instead, they picked him choice morsels, and made a great deal of him, until his silly young head was quite turned, and he sat up and gave himself a few airs—not many, for Stratford was no great place in which to pick up airs.

When they had eaten they wanted Nick to sing; but again Carew interposed. "Nay," said he; "he hath just eaten his fill, so he cannot sing. Moreover, he is no jackdaw to screech in such a cage as this. He shall not sing until to-morrow in the play."

At this some of the leading players who held shares in the venture demurred, doubting if Nick could sing at all; but—"Hark 'e," said Master Carew, shortly, clapping his hand upon his poniard, "I say that he can. Do ye take me?"

So they said no more; and shortly after he took Nick away, and left them over their tankards, singing uproariously.

The Blue Boar Inn had not a bed to spare, nor had the players kept a place for Carew; at which he smiled grimly, said he 'd not forget it, and took lodgings for himself and Nick at the Three Tuns in the next street.

Nick spoke indeed of his mother's cousin, with whom he had meant to stay, but the master-player protested warmly; so, little loath, and much flattered by the attentions of so great a man, Nick gave over the idea and said no more about it.

When the chamberlain had shown them to their room and they were both undressed, Nick knelt beside the bed and said a prayer, as he always did at home. Carew watched him curiously. It was quiet there, and the light dim; Nick was young, and his yellow hair was very curly. Carew could hear the faint breath murmuring through the boy's lips as he prayed, and while he stared at the little white figure his mouth twitched in a queer way. But he tossed his head, and muttered to himself, "What, Gaston Carew, turning soft? Nay, nay. I 'll do it—on my soul, I will!" rolled into bed, and was soon fast asleep.

As for Nick, what with the excitement of the day, the dazzling fancies in his brain, his tired legs, the weird night noises in the town, and strange, tremendous dreams, he scarce could get to sleep at all; but toward morning he fell into a refreshing doze, and did not wake until the town was loud with May.

CHAPTER IX

THE MAY-DAY PLAY

IT was soon afternoon. All Coventry was thronged with people keeping holiday, and at the Blue Boar a scene of wild confusion reigned.

Tap-room and hall were crowded with guests, and in the cobbled court horses innumerable stamped and whinnied. The players, with knitted brows, stalked about the quieter nooks, going over their several parts, and looking to their costumes, which were for the most part upon their backs; while the thumping and pounding of the carpenters at work upon the stage in the inn-yard were enough to drive a quiet-loving person wild.

Nick scarcely knew whether he were on his head or on his heels. The master-player would not let him eat at all after once breaking his fast, for fear it might affect his voice, and had him say his lines a hundred times until he had them pat. Then he was off, directing here, there, and everywhere, until the court was cleared of all that had no business there, and the last surreptitious small boy had been duly projected from the gates by Peter Hostler's hobnailed boot.

"Now, Nick," said Carew, coming up all in a gale, and throwing a sky-blue silken cloak about Nick's shoulders, "thou 'lt enter here"; and he led him to a hallway door just opposite the gates. "When Master Whitelaw, as the Duke, calls out, 'How now, who comes?—I 'll match him for the ale!' be quickly in and answer to thy part; and, marry, boy, don't miss thy cues, or—tsst, thy head 's not worth a peascod!" With that he clapped his hand upon his poniard and glared into Nick's eyes, as if to look clear through to the back of the boy's wits. Nick heard his white teeth grind, and was all at once very much afraid of him, for he did indeed look dreadful.

So Nicholas Attwood stood by the entry door, with his heart in his throat, waiting his turn.

He could hear the pages in the courtyard outside shouting for stools for their masters, and squabbling over the best places upon the stage. Then the gates creaked, and there came a wild rush of feet and a great crying out as the 'prentices and burghers trooped into the inn-yard, pushing and crowding for places near the stage. Those who had the money bawled aloud for farthing stools. The rest stood jostling in a wrangling crowd upon the ground, while up and down a girl's shrill voice went all the time, crying high, "Cherry ripe, cherry ripe! Who 'll buy my sweet May cherries?"

Then there was another shout, and a rattling tread of feet along the wooden balconies that ran around the walls of the inn-yard, and cries from the apprentices below: "Good-day, fair Master Harrington! Good-day, Sir Thomas Parkes! Good-day, sweet Mistress Nettleby and Master Nettleby! Good-day, good-day, good-day!" for the richer folk were coming in at twopence each, and all the galleries were full. And then he heard the baker's boy with sugared cakes and ginger-nuts go stamping up the stairs.

The musicians in the balcony overhead were tuning up. There was a flute, a viol, a gittern, a fiddle, and a drum; and behind the curtain, just outside the door, Nick could hear the master-player's low voice giving hasty orders to the others.

So he said his lines all over to himself, and cleared his throat. Then on a sudden a shutter opened high above the orchestra, a trumpet blared, the kettledrum crashed, and he heard a loud voice shout:

"Good citizens of Coventry, and high-born gentles all: know ye now that we, the players of the company of His Grace, Charles, Lord Howard, High Admiral of England, Ireland, Wales, Calais, and Boulogne, the marches of Normandy, Gascony, and Aquitaine, Captain-General of the Navy and the Seas of Her Gracious Majesty the Queen—"

At that the crowd in the courtyard cheered and cheered again.

"—will, with your kind permission, play forthwith the laughable comedy of 'The Three Grey Gowns,' by Master Thomas Heywood, in which will be spoken many good things, old and new, and a brand-new song will be sung. Now, hearken all—the play begins!"

The trumpet blared, the kettledrum crashed again, and as a sudden hush fell over the throng without Nick heard the voices of the players going on.

It was a broad farce, full of loud jests and nonsense, a great thwacking of sticks and tumbling about; and Nick, with his eye to the crack of the door, listened with all his ears for his cue, far too excited even to think of laughing at the rough jokes, though the crowd in the inn-yard roared till they held their sides.

Carew came hurrying up, with an anxious look in his restless eyes.

"Ready, Nicholas!" said he, sharply, taking Nick by the arm and lifting the latch. "Go straight down front now as I told thee—mind thy cues—speak boldly—sing as thou didst sing for me—and if thou wouldst not break mine heart, do not fail me now! I have staked it all upon thee here—and we *must* win!"

"How now, who comes?" Nick heard a loud voice call outside—the door-latch clicked behind him—he was out in the open air and down the stage before he quite knew where he was.

The stage was built against the wall just opposite the gates. It was but a temporary platform of planks laid upon trestles. One side of it was against the wall, and around the three other sides the crowd was packed close to the platform rail.

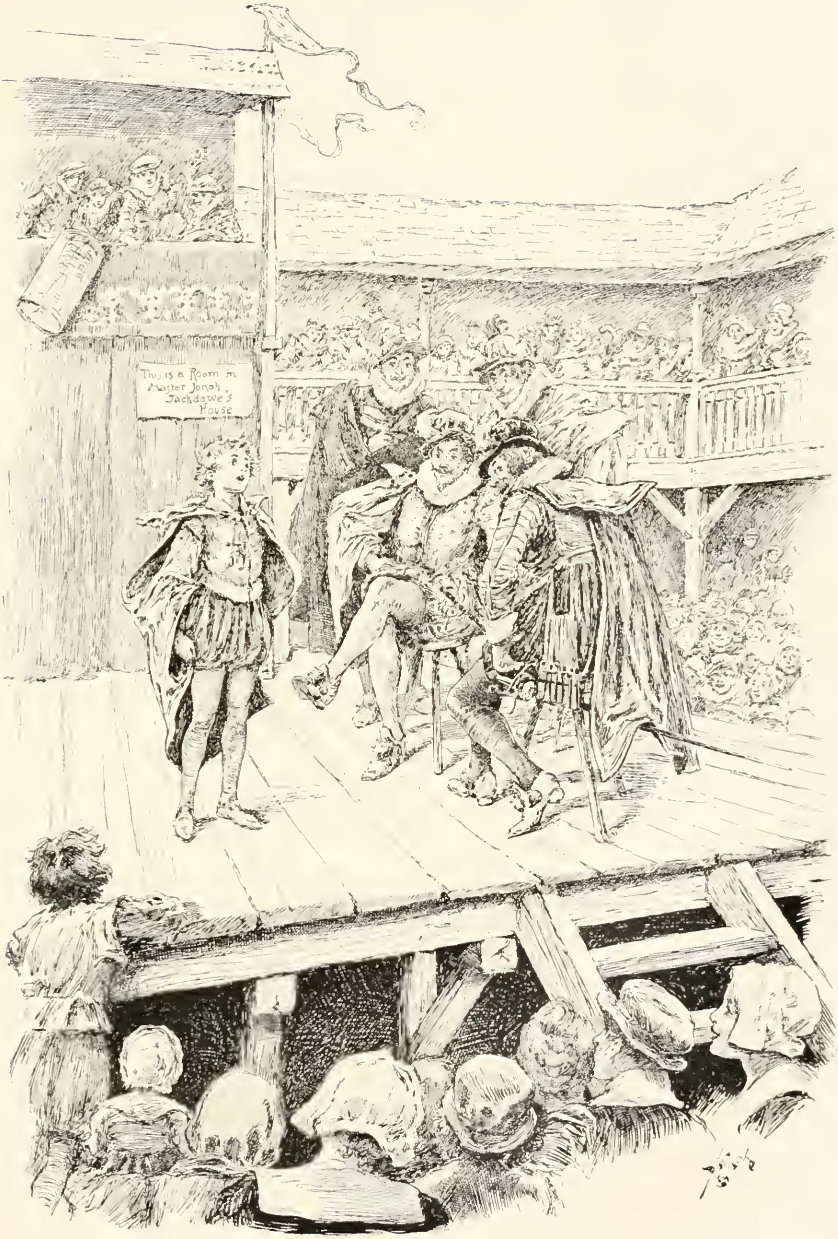
At the ends, upon the boards, several wealthy gallants sat on high, three-legged stools, within arm's reach of the players acting there. The courtyard was a sea of heads, and the balconies were filled with gentlefolk in holiday attire, eating cakes and chaffing gaily at the play. All was one bewildered cloud of staring eyes to Nick, and the only thing which he was sure he saw was the painted sign that hung upon the curtain at the rear, which in the lack of other scenery announced in large red print: "This is a Room in Master Jonah Jackdawe's House."

And then he heard the last quick words, "I 'll match him for the ale!" and started on his lines.

It was not that he said so ill what little he had to say, but that his voice was homelike and familiar in its sound, one of their own, with no amazing London accent to the words—just the speech of every-day, the sort that they all knew.

First, some one in the yard laughed out—a shock-headed ironmonger's apprentice, "Whoy, bullies, there be hayseed in his hair. 'T is took off pasture over-soon. I fecks! they 've plucked him green!"

There was a hoarse, exasperating laugh. Nick hesitated in his lines. The player at his back tried to prompt him, but only made the matter worse, and behind the green curtain at the door a hand went "clap" upon a dagger-hilt. The play lagged, and the crowd began to jeer. Nick's heart was full of fear and of angry shame that he had dared to try. Then all at once there came a brief pause, in which he vaguely realized that no one spoke. The man behind him thrust him forward, and whispering wrathfully, "Quick, quick—sing up, thou little fool!" stepped back and left him there alone.


This is a Room in Master Jonah, Jackdawe's House

"NICK THOUGHT OF HIS MOTHER'S SINGING ON A SUMMER'S EVENING—DREW A DEEP BREATH AND BEGAN TO SING."

A viol overhead took up the time, the gittern struck a few sharp notes. This unexpected music stopped the noise, and all was still. Nick thought of his mother's voice singing on a summer's evening among the hollyhocks, and as the viol's droning died away he drew a deep breath and began to sing the words of "Heywood's newest song":

"Pack, clouds, away, and welcome, day;
With night we banish sorrow;
Sweet air, blow soft; mount, lark, aloft,
To give my love good-morrow!"

It was only a part of a madrigal, the air to which they had fitted the words,—the same air that Nick had sung in the woods,—a thing scarce meant ever to be sung alone, a simple strain, a few plain notes, and at the close one brief, queer, warbling trill like a bird's wild song, that rose and fell and rose again like a silver ripple.

The instruments were still; the fresh young voice came out alone, and it was done so soon that Nick hardly knew that he had sung at all. For a moment no one seemed to breathe. Then there was a very great noise, and all the court seemed hurling at him. A man upon the stage sprang to his feet. What they were going to do to him Nick did not know. He gave a frightened cry, and ran past the green curtain, through the open door, and into the master-player's excited arms.

"Quick, quick!" cried Carew. "Go back, go back! There, hark!—dost not hear them call? Quick, out again—they call thee back!" With that he thrust Nick through the door. The man upon the stage came up, slipped something into his hand—Nick, all bewildered, knew not what; and there he stood, quite stupefied, not knowing what to do. Then Carew came out hastily and led him down the stage, bowing, and pressing his hand to his heart, and smiling like a summer sunrise; so that Nick, seeing this, did the same, and bowed as neatly as he could; though, to be sure, his was only a simple, country-bred bow, and no such ceremonious to-do as Master Carew's courtly London obeisance.

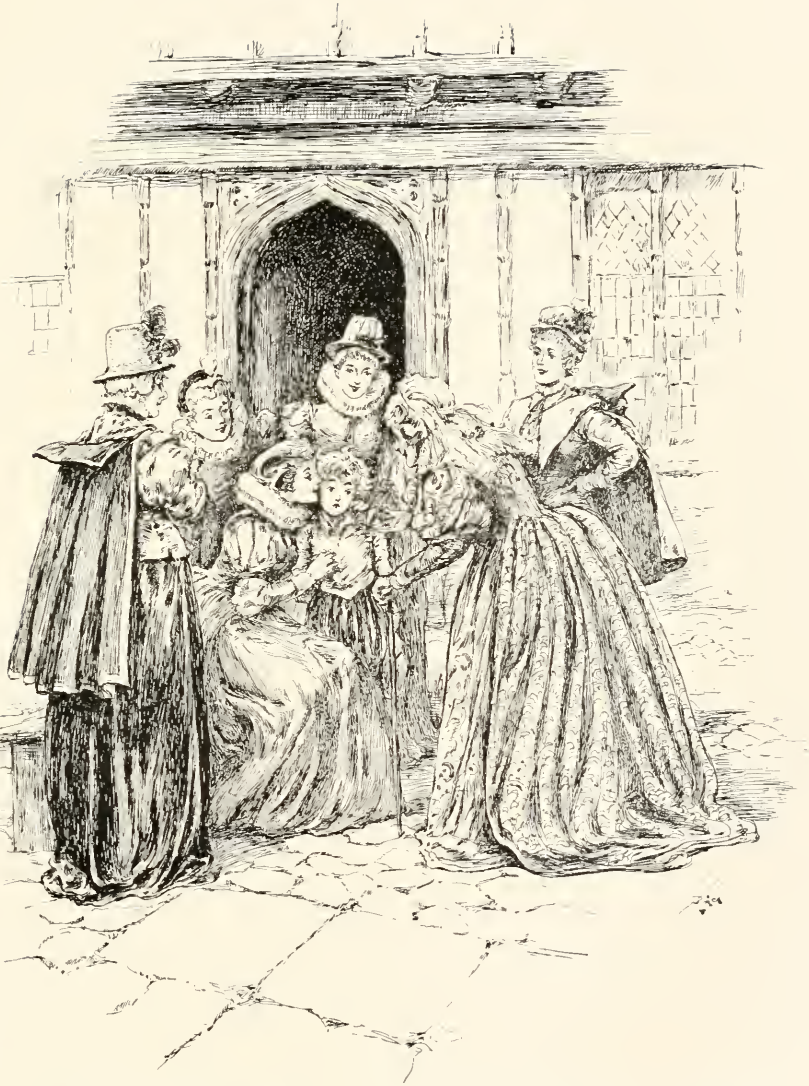
Every one was standing up and shouting so that not a soul could hear his ears, until the ironmonger's apprentice bellowed above the rest; "Whoy, bullies!" he shouted, amid a chorus of cheers and laughter, "did n't I say 't was catched out in the fields—it be a skylark, sure enough! Come, Muster Skylark, sing that song again, an' thou shalt ha' my brand-new cap!"

Then many voices cried out together, "Sing it again! The Skylark—the Skylark!"

Nick looked up, startled. "Why, Master Carew," said he, with a tremble in his voice, "do they mean me?"

Carew put one hand beneath Nick's chin and turned his face up, smiling. The master-player's cheeks were flushed with triumph, and his dark eyes danced with pride. "Ay, Nicholas Skylark; 't is thou they mean."

The viol and the music came again from overhead, and when they ceased Nick sang the little song once more. And when the master-player had taken him outside, and the play was over, some fine ladies came and kissed him, to his great confusion; for no one but his mother or his



"SOME FINE LADIES CAME AND KISSED HIM, TO HIS GREAT CONFUSION."

kin had ever done so before, and these had much perfume about them, musk and rose-attar, so that they smelled like rose-mallows in July. The players of the Lord Admiral's company were going about shaking hands with Carew and with each other as if they had not met for years, and slapping one another upon the back; and one came over, a tall, solemn, black-haired man, he who had written the song, and stood with his feet apart and stared at Nick, but spoke never a word, which Nick thought was very singular. But as he turned away he said, with a world of pity in his voice, "And I have writ two hundred plays, yet never saw thy like. Lad, lad, thou art a jewel in a wild swine's snout!" which Nick did not understand at all; nor why Master Carew said so sharply, "Come, Heywood, hold thy blabbing tongue; we are all in the same sty."

"Speak for thyself, Gat Carew!" answered Master Heywood, firmly. "I'll have no hand in this affair, I tell thee once for all!"

Master Carew flushed queerly and bit his lip, and, turning hastily away, took Nick to walk about the town. Nick then, for the first time, looked into his hand to see what the man upon the stage had given him. It was a gold rose-noble.

CHAPTER X

AFTER THE PLAY

THROUGH the high streets of the third city of the realm Master Gaston Carew strode as if he were a very king, and Coventry his kingdom.

There was music everywhere,—of pipers and fiddlers, drums, tabrets, flutes, and horns,—and there were dancing bears upon the corners, with minstrels, jugglers, chapmen crying their singsong wares, and such a mighty hurly-burly as Nick had never seen before. And wherever there was a wonder to be seen, Carew had Nick see it, though it cost a penny a peep, and lifted him to watch the fencing and quarter-staff play in the market-place. And at one of the gay booths he bought gilt ginger-nuts and caraway cakes with currants on the top, and gave them all to Nick, who thanked him kindly, but said, if Master Carew pleased, he 'd rather have his supper, for he was very hungry.

"Why, to be sure," said Carew, and tossed a silver penny for a scramble to the crowd; "thou shalt have the finest supper in the town."

Whereupon, bowing to all the great folk they met, and being bowed to most politely in return, they came to the Three Tuns.

Stared at by a hundred curious eyes, made way for everywhere, and followed by wondering exclamations of envy, it was little wonder that Nick, a simple country lad, at last began to think that there was not in all the world another gentleman so grand as Master Gaston Carew, and also to have a pleasant notion that Nicholas Attwood was no bad fellow himself.

The lordly innkeeper came smirking and bobbing obsequiously about, with his freshest towel on his arm, and took the master-player's order as a dog would take a bone.

"Here, sirrah," said Carew, haughtily; "fetch us some repast, I care not what, so it be wholesome food—a green Banbury cheese, some simnel bread and oat-cakes; a pudding, hark 'e, sweet and full of plums, with honey and a pasty—a meat pasty, marry, a pasty made of fat and toothsome eels; and moreover, fellow, ale to wash it down—none of thy penny ale, mind ye, too weak to run out of the spigot, but snapping good brew—dost take me?—with beef and mustard, tripe, herring, and a good fat capon broiled to a turn!"

The innkeeper gaped like a fish.

"How now, sirrah? Dost think I cannot pay thy score?" quoth Carew, sharply.

"Nay, nay," stammered the host; "but, sir, where—where will ye put it all without bursting into bits?"

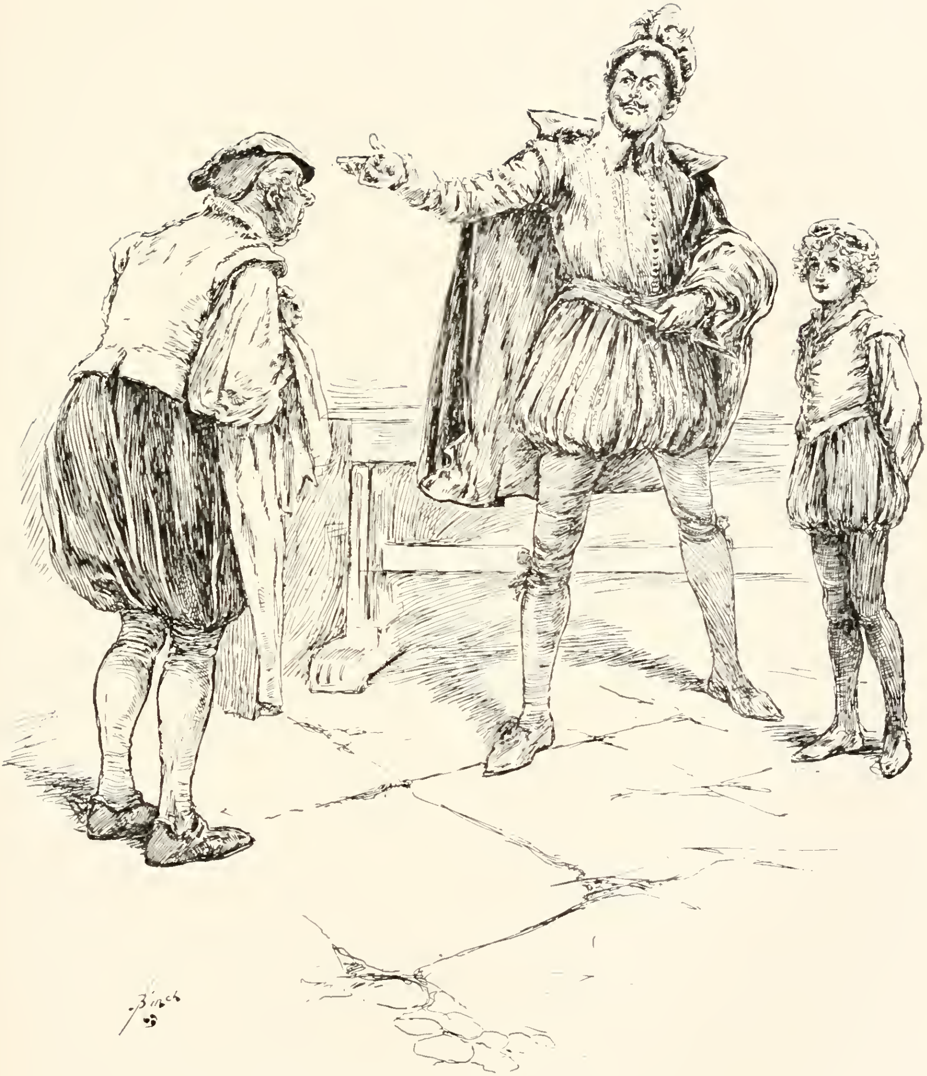
"Be off with thee!" cried Carew, sharply. "That is my affair. Nay, Nick," said he, laughing at the boy's astonished look; "we shall not burst. What we do not have to-night we 'll have in the morning. 'T is the way with these inns,—to feed the early birds with scraps,—so the more we leave from supper the more we 'll have for breakfast. And thou wilt need a good breakfast to ride on all day long."

"Ride?" exclaimed Nick. "Why, sir, I was minded to walk back to Stratford, and keep my gold rose-noble whole."

"Walk?" cried the master-player, scornfully. "Thou, with thy golden throat? Nay, Nicholas, thou shalt ride to-morrow like a very king, if I have to pay for the horse myself, twelvepence the day!" and with that he began chuckling as if it were a joke.

But Nick stood up, and, bowing, thanked him gratefully; at which the master-player went from chuckling to laughing, and leered at Nick so oddly that the boy would have thought him tipsy, save that there had been nothing yet to drink. And a queer sense of uneasiness came creeping over him as he watched the master-player's eyes opening and shutting, opening and shutting, so that one moment he seemed to be staring and the next almost asleep; though all the while his keen, dark eyes peered out from between the lids like old dog-foxes from their holes, looking Nick over from head to foot, and from foot to head again, as if measuring him with an ellwand.

When the supper came, filling the whole table and the



"HOW NOW, SIRRAH! DOST THINK I CANNOT PAY THY SCORE?"

sideboard too, Nick arose to serve the meat as he was used at home; but, "Nay, Nicholas Skylark, my honey-throat," cried Carew, "sit thee down! Thou wait on me—thou songster of the silver tongue? Nay, nay, sweetheart; the knave shall wait on thee, or I 'll wait on thee myself—I will, upon my word! Why, Nick, I tell thee I love thee, and dost think I'd let thee wait or walk?—nay, nay, thou 'lt ride to-morrow like a king, and have all Stratford wait for thee!" At this he chuckled so that he almost choked upon a mouthful of bread and meat.

"Canst ride, Nicholas?"

"Fairly, sir."

"Fairly? Fie, modesty! I warrant thou canst ride like a very centaur. What sayest—I 'll ride a ten-mile race with thee to-morrow as we go?"

"Why," cried Nick, "are ye going back to Stratford to play, after all?"

"To Stratford? Nay; not for a bushel of good gold Harry shovel-boards! Bah! That town is ratsbane and nightshade in my mouth! Nay, we 'll not go back to Stratford town; but we shall ride a piece with thee, Nicholas,—we shall ride a piece with thee."

Chuckling again to himself, he fell to upon the pasty and said no more.

Nick held his peace, as he was taught to do unless first spoken to; but he could not help thinking that stage-players, and master-players in particular, were very queer folk.

CHAPTER XI

DISOWNED

NIGHT came down on Stratford town that last sweet April day, and the pastured kine came lowing home. Supper-time passed, and the cool stars came twinkling out; but still Nick Attwood did not come.

“He hath stayed to sleep with Robin, Master Burgess Getley's son,” said Mistress Attwood, standing in the door, and staring out into the dusk; “he is often lonely here.”

“He should ha' telled thee on it, then,” said Simon Attwood. “This be no way to do. I 've a mind to put him to a trade.”

“Nay, Simon,” protested his wife; “he may be careless, —he is young yet,—but Nicholas is a good lad. Let him have his schooling out—he 'll be the better for it.”

“Then let him show it as he goes along,” said Attwood, grimly, as he blew the candle out.

But May-day dawned; mid-morning came, mid-afternoon, then supper-time again; and supper-time crept into dusk—and still no Nicholas Attwood.

His mother grew uneasy; but his father only growled:

"We 'll reckon up when he cometh home. Master Brunswood tells me he was na at the school the whole day yesterday—and he be feared to show his face. I 'll *fear* him with a bit of birch!"

"Do na be too hard with the lad, Simon," pleaded Mistress Attwood. "Who knows what hath happened to him? He must be hurt, or he 'd 'a' come home to his mother"—and she began to wring her hands. "He may ha' fallen from a tree, and lieth all alone out on the hill—or, Simon, the Avon! Thou dost na think our lad be drowned?"

"Fudge!" said Simon Attwood. "Born to hang 'll never drown!"

When, however, the next day crept around and still his son did not come home, a doubt stole into the tanner's own heart. Yet when his wife was for starting out to seek some tidings of the boy, he stopped her wrathfully.

"Nay, Margaret," said he; "thou shalt na go traipsing around the town like a hen wi' but one chick. I wull na ha' thee made a laughing-stock by all the fools in Stratford."

But as the third day rolled around, about the middle of the afternoon the tanner himself sneaked out at the back door of his tannery in Southam's lane, and went up into the town.

"Robin Getley," he asked at the guildschool door, "was my son wi' thee overnight?"

"Nay, Master Attwood. Has he not come back?"

"Come back? From where?"

Robin hung his head.

"From where?" demanded the tanner. "Come, boy!"

"From Coventry," said Robin, knowing that the truth would out at last, anyway.

"He went to see the players, sir," spoke up Hal Saddler, briskly, not heeding Robin's stealthy kick. "He said he 'd bide wi' Diccon Haggard overnight; an' he said he wished he were a master-player himself, sir, too."

Simon Attwood, frowning blackly, hurried on. It *was* Nick, then, whom he had seen crossing the market-square.

Wat Raven, who swept Clopton bridge, had seen two boys go up the Warwick road. "One were thy Nick, Muster Attwood," said he, thumping the dirt from his broom across the coping-stone, "and the other were Dawson's Hodge."

The angry tanner turned again into the market-place. His brows were knit, and his eyes were hot, yet his step was heavy and slow. Above all things, he hated disobedience, yet in his surly way he loved his only son; and far worse than disobedience, he hated that *his* son should disobey.

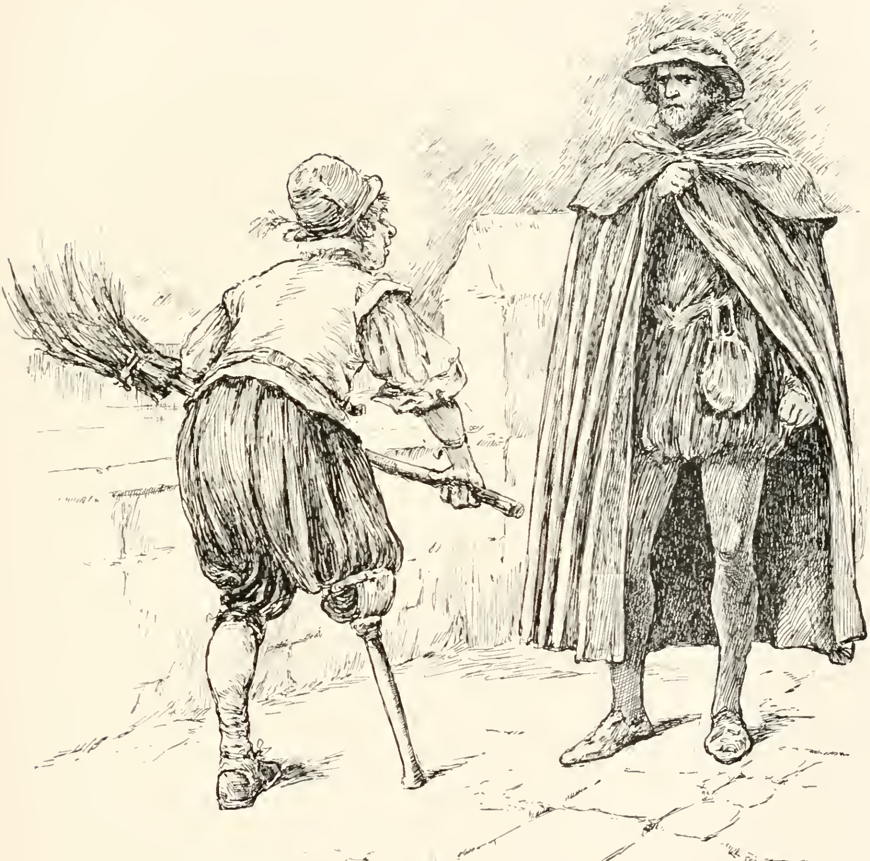
Astride a beam in front of Master Thompson's house sat Roger Dawson. Simon Attwood took him by the collar none too gently.

"Here, leave be!" choked Roger, wriggling hard; but the tanner's grip was like iron. "Wert thou in Coventry May-day?" he asked sternly.

"Nay, that I was na," sputtered Hodge. "A plague on Coventry!"

"Do na lie to me—thou wert there wi' my son Nicholas."

"I was na," snarled Hodge. "Nick Attwood threshed



"'ONE WERE THY NICK, MUSTER ATTWOOD,' SAID HE."

me in the Warrick road; an' I be no dawg to follow at the heels o' folks as threshes me."

"Where be he, then?" demanded Attwood, with a sudden sinking at heart in spite of his wrath.

"How should I know? A went away wi' a play-actoring fellow in a plum-colored cloak; and play-actoring fellow said a loved him like a's own, and patted a's back, and flung me hard names, like stones at a lost dawg. Now le' me go, Muster Attwood—cross my heart, 't is all I know!"

"Is 't Nicholas ye seek, Master Attwood?" asked Tom Carpenter, turning from his fleurs-de-lis. "Why, sir, he 's gone got famous, sir. I was in Coventry mysel' May-day; and—why, sir, Nick was all the talk! He sang there at the Blue Boar inn-yard with the Lord High Admiral's players, and took a part in the play; and, sir, ye 'd scarce believe me, but the people went just daft to hear him sing, sir."

Simon Attwood heard no more. He walked down High street in a daze. With hard men bitter blows strike doubly deep. He stopped before the guildhall school. The clock struck five; each iron clang seemed beating upon his heart. He raised his hand as if to shut the clangor out, and then his face grew stern and hard. "He hath gone his own wilful way," said he, bitterly. "Let him follow it to the end."

Mistress Attwood came to meet him, running in the garden-path. "Nicholas?" was all that she could say.

"Never speak to me of him again," he said, and passed her by into the house. "He hath gone away with a pack of stage-playing rascals and vagabonds, whither no man knoweth."

Taking the heavy Bible down from the shelf, he lit a rushlight at the fire, although it was still broad daylight, and sat there with the great book open in his lap until the sun went down and the chill night wind crept in along the floor; yet he could not read a single word and never turned a page.

CHAPTER XII

A STRANGE RIDE

RAT-A-TAT-TAT at the first dim hint of dawn went the chamberlain's knuckles upon the door. To Nick it seemed scarce midnight yet, so sound had been his sleep.

Master Carew having gotten into his high-topped riding-boots with a great puffing and tugging, they washed their faces at the inn-yard pump by the smoky light of the hostler's lantern, and then in a subdued, half-wakened way made a hearty breakfast off the fragments of the last night's feast. Part of the remaining cold meat, cheese, and cakes Carew stowed in his leather pouch. The rest he left in the lap of a beggar sleeping beside the door.

The street was dim with a chilly fog, through which a few pale stars still struggled overhead. The houses were all shut and barred; nobody was abroad, and the night-watch slept in comfortable doorways here and there, with lolling heads and lanterns long gone out. As they came along the crooked street, a stray cat scurried away with scared green eyes, and a kenneled hound set up a lonesome howl.

But the Blue Boar Inn was stirring like an ant-hill, with firefly lanterns flitting up and down, and a cheery glow about the open door. The horses of the company, scrubbed unreasonably clean, snorted and stamped in little bridled clumps about the courtyard, and the stable-boys, not scrubbed at all, clanked at the pump or shook out wrinkled saddle-cloths with most prodigious yawns. The grooms were buckling up the packs; the chamberlain and sleepy-lidded maids stood at the door, waiting their farewell farthings.

Some of the company yawned in the tap-room; some yawned out of doors with steaming stirrup-cup in hand; and some came yawning down the stairways pulling on their riding-cloaks, booted, spurred, and ready for a long day's ride.

"Good-morrow, sirs," said Carew, heartily. "Good-morrow, sir, to you," said they, and all came over to speak to Nicholas in a very kindly way; and one or two patted him on the cheek and walked away speaking in undertones among themselves, keeping one eye on Carew all the while. And Master Tom Heywood, the play-writer, came out with a great slice of fresh wheat-bread, thick with butter and dripping with yellow honey, and gave it to Nick; and stood there silently with a very queer expression watching him eat it, until Carew's groom led up a stout hackney and a small roan palfrey to the block, and the master-player, crying impatiently, "Up with thee, Nick; we must be ambling!" sprang into the saddle of the gray.

The sleepy inn-folk roused a bit to send a cheery volley of, "Fare ye well, sirs; come again," after the departing players, and the long cavalcade cantered briskly out of the inn-yard, in double rank, with a great clinking of bridle-chains and a drifting odor of wet leather and heavy perfume.

Nick sat very erect and rode his best, feeling like some errant knight of the great Round Table, ready to right the whole world's wrongs. "But what about the horse?" said he. "We can na keep him in Stratford, sir."

"Oh, that 's all seen to," said the master-player. "'T is to be sent back by the weekly carrier."

"And where do I turn into the Stratford road, sir?" asked Nick, as the players clattered down the cobbled street in a cloud of mist that steamed up so thickly from the stones that the horses seemed to have no legs, but to float like boats.

"Some distance further on," replied Carew, carelessly. "'T is not the way we came that thou shalt ride to-day; that is t' other end of town, and the gate not open yet. But the longest way round is the shortest way home, so let 's be spurring on."

At the corner of the street a cross and sleepy cobbler was strapping a dirty urchin, who bellowed lustily. Nick winced.

"Hollo!" cried Carew. "What 's to do?"

"Why, sir," said Nick, ruefully, "father will thresh me well this night."

"Nay," said Carew, in a quite decided tone; "that he 'll not, I promise thee!"—and as he spoke he chuckled softly to himself.

The man before them turned suddenly around and grinned queerly; but, catching the master-player's eye, whipped his head about like a weather-vane in a gale, and cantered on.

As they came down the narrow street the watchmen were just swinging wide the city gates, and gave a cheer to speed the parting guests, who gave a rouse in turn, and were soon lost to sight in the mist which hid the valley in a great gray sea.

"How shall I know where to turn off, sir?" asked Nick, a little anxiously. "'T is all alike."

"I 'll tell thee," said the master-player; "rest thee easy on that score. I know the road thou art to ride much better than thou dost thyself."

He smiled quite frankly as he spoke, and Nick could not help wondering why the man before them again turned around and eyed him with that sneaking grin.

He did not like the fellow's looks. He had scowling black brows, hair cut as close as if the rats had gnawed it off, a pair of ill-shaped bandy-legs, a wide, unwholesome slit of a mouth, and a nose like a raspberry tart. His whole appearance was servile and mean, and there was a sly malice in his furtive eyes. Besides that, and a thing which strangely fascinated Nick's gaze, there was a hole through the gristle of his right ear, scarred about as if it had been burned, and through this hole the fellow had tied a bow of crimson ribbon, like a butterfly alighted upon his ear.

"A pretty fellow!" said Carew, with a shrug. "He 'll be hard put to dodge the hangman yet; but he 's a right good fellow in his way, and he has served me—he has served me."

The first loud burst of talk had ceased, and all rode silently along. The air was chill, and Nick was grateful for the cloak that Carew threw around him. There was no sound but the beat of many hoofs in the dust-padded road, and now and then the crowing of a cock somewhere within the cloaking fog. The stars were gone, and the sky was lighting up; and all at once, as they rode, the clouds ahead, low down and to the right, broke raggedly away and let a red sun-gleam shoot through across the mist, bathing the riders in dazzling rosy light.

"Why, Master Carew," cried Nick, no little startled, "there comes the sun, almost ahead! We 're riding eastward, sir. We 've missed the road!"

"Oh, no, we 've not," said Carew; "nothing of the sort." His tone was so peremptory and sharp that Nick said nothing more, but rode along, vaguely wishing that he was already clattering down Stratford High street.

The clouds scattered as the sun came up, and the morning haze drifted away into cool dales, and floated off upon the breeze. And as the world woke up the players wakened too, and rode gaily along, laughing, singing, and chattering together, until Nick thought he had never in all his life before seen such a jolly fellowship. His heart was blithe as he reined his curveting palfrey by the master-player's side, and watched the sunlight dance and sparkle along the dashing line from dagger-hilts and jeweled clasps, and the mist-lank plumes curl crisp again in the warmth of the rising sun.

The master-player, too, had a graceful, taking way of being half familiar with the lad; he was besides a marvelous teller of wonderful tales, and whiled away the time with jests and quips, mile after mile, till Nick forgot both road and time, and laughed until his sides were sore.

Yet slowly, as they rode along, it came home to him with the passing of the land that this was country new and strange. So he began to take notice of this and that beside the way; and as he noticed he began to grow uneasy. Thrice had he come to Coventry, but surely never by a road like this.

Yet still the master-player joked and laughed and pleased the boy with little things—until Nick laughed too, and let the matter go. At last, however, when they had ridden fully an hour, they passed a moss-grown abbey on the left-hand side of the road, a strange old place that Nick could not recall.

"Are ye sure, Master Carew," he ventured timidly—"are ye sure we be na going wrong, sir?"

At that the master-player took on so offended an air that Nick was sorry he had spoken.

"Why, now," said Carew, haughtily, "if thou dost know the roads of England better than I, who have trudged and ridden them all these years, I 'll sit me down and learn of thee how to follow mine own nose. I tell thee I know the road thou art to ride this day better than thou dost thyself; and I 'll see to it that thou dost come without fail to the very place that thou art going. I will, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour!"

But in spite of this assurance, and in spite of the master-player's ceaseless stream of gaiety and marvels, Nick became more and more uneasy. The road was certainly growing stranger and stranger as they passed. The company, too, instead of ambling leisurely along, as they had done at first, were now spurring ahead at a good round gallop, in answer to a shrill whistle from the master-player; and the horses were wet with sweat.

They passed a country village, too, that was quite unknown to Nick, and a great highway running to the north that he had never seen before; and when they had ridden for about two hours, the road swerved southward to a shining ford, and on a little tableland beyond he saw the gables of a town he did not know.

"Why, Master Carew!" he cried out, half indignant, half perplexed, and thoroughly frightened, "this is na the Stratford road at all. I 'm going back. I will na ride another mile!"

As he spoke he wheeled the roan sharply out of the clattering file with a slash of the rein across the withers, and started back along the hill past the rest of the company, who came thumping down behind.

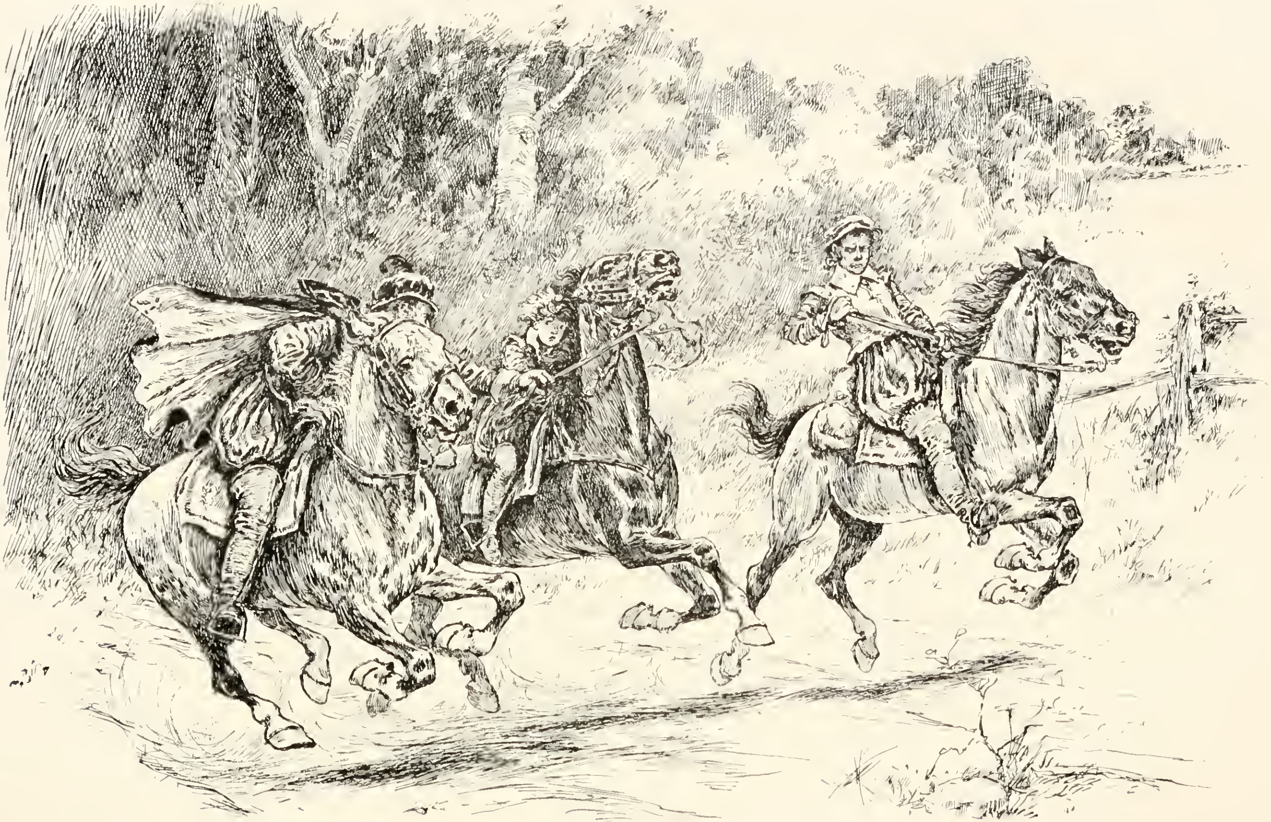
"Stop him! Stop him there!" he heard the master-player shout, and there was something in the fierce, high voice that turned his whole heart sick. What right had they to stop him? This was not the Stratford road; he was certain of that now. But "Stop him—stop him there!" he heard the master-player call, and a wild, unreasoning fright came over him. He dug his heels into the palfrey's heaving sides and urged him up the hill through the cloud of dust that came rolling down behind the horsemen. The hindmost riders had plunged into those before, and the whole array was struggling, shouting, and wrangling in wild disorder; but out of the flurry Carew and the bandy-legged man with the ribbon in his ear spurred furiously and came galloping after him at the top of their speed.

Nick cried out, and beat the palfrey with the rein; but the chase was short. They overtook him as he topped the hill, one on each side, and, leaning over, Carew snatched the bridle from his hand. "Thou little imp!" he panted, as he turned the roan around and started down the hill. "Don't try this on again!"

"Oh, Master Carew," gasped Nick, "what are ye going to do wi' me?"

"Do with thee?" cried the master-player, savagely clapping his hand upon his poniard,—"why, I am going to do with thee just whatever I please. Dost hear? And, hark 'e, this sort of caper doth not please me at all; and by the whistle of the Lord High Admiral, if thou triest it on again, thy life is not worth a rotten peascod!"

Unbuckling the rein, he tossed one end to the bandy-legged man, and holding the other in his own hand, with Nick riding helplessly between them, they trotted down the



"THEY OVERTOOK HIM AS HE TOPPED THE HILL, AND, LEANING OVER, CAREW SNATCHED THE BRIDLE FROM HIS HAND."

hill again, took their old places in the ranks, and spattered through the shallow ford.

The bandy-legged man had pulled a dagger from beneath his coat, and held it under his bridle-rein, shining through the horse's mane as they dashed through the still half-sleeping town. Nick was speechless with terror.

Beyond the town's end they turned sharply to the northeast, galloping steadily onward for what was perhaps half an hour, though to Nick it seemed a forever, until they came out into a great highway running southward. "Watling street!" he heard the man behind him say, and knew that they were in the old Roman road that stretched from London to the north. Still they were galloping, though long strings dribbled from the horses' mouths, and the saddle-leathers dripped with foam. One or two looked back at him and bit their lips; but Carew's eyes were hot and fierce, and his hand was on his poniard. The rest, after a curious glance or two, shrugged their shoulders carelessly and galloped on: this affair was Master Gaston Carew's business, not theirs.

Until high noon they hurried on with neither stop nor stay. Then they came to a place where a little brook sang through the grass by the roadside in a shady nook beneath some mighty oaks, and there the master-player whistled for a halt, to give the horses breath and rest, and to water them at the brook-pools. Some of the players sauntered up and down to stretch their tired legs, munching meat and bread; and some lay down upon the grass and slept a little. Two of them came, offering Nick some cakes and cheese; but he was crying hard and would neither eat nor drink, though Carew urged him earnestly. Then Master Tom Heywood, with an ugly look at Carew, and without so much as an if-ye-please or a by-your-leave, led Nick up the brook to a spot where it had not been muddied by the horses, and made him wash his dusty face and hands in the cool water and dampen his hair, though he complied as if in a daze. And indeed Nick rode on through the long afternoon, clinging helplessly to the pommel of his saddle, sobbing bitterly until for very weariness he could no longer sob.

It was after nine o'clock that night when they rode into Towcester, and all that was to be seen was a butcher's boy carting garbage out of the town and whistling to keep his courage up. The watch had long since gone to sleep about the silent streets, but a dim light burned in the taproom of the Old Brown Cow; and there the players rested for the night.

CHAPTER XIII

A DASH FOR FREEDOM

NICK awoke from a heavy, burning sleep, aching from head to foot. The master-player, up and dressed, stood by the window, scowling grimly out into the ashy dawn. Nick made haste to rise, but could not stifle a sharp cry of pain as he staggered to his feet, he was so racked and sore with riding.

At the boy's smothered cry Carew turned, and his dark face softened with a sudden look of pity and concern. "Why, Nick, my lad," he cried, and hurried to his side, "this is too bad, indeed!" and without more words took him gently in his arms and carried him down to the courtyard well, where he bathed him softly from neck to heel in the cold, refreshing water, and wiped him with a soft, clean towel as tenderly as if he had been the lad's own mother. And having dried him thoroughly, he rubbed him with a waxy ointment that smelled of henbane and poppies, until the aching was almost gone. So soft and so kind was he withal that Nick took heart after a little and asked timidly, "And ye will let me go home to-day, sir, will ye not?"

The master-player frowned.

"Please, Master Carew, let me go."

"Come, come," said Carew, impatiently, "enough of this!" and stamped his foot.

"But, oh, Master Carew," pleaded Nick, with a sob in his throat, "my mother's heart will surely break if I do na come home!"

Carew started, and his mouth twitched queerly. "Enough, I say—enough!" he cried. "I will not hear; I 'll have no more. I tell thee hold thy tongue—be dumb! I 'll not have ears—thou shalt not speak! Dost hear?" He dashed the towel to the ground. "I bid thee hold thy tongue."

Nick hid his face between his hands, and leaned against the rough stone wall, a naked, shivering, wretched little chap indeed. "Oh, mother, mother, mother!" he sobbed pitifully.

A singular expression came over the master-player's face. "I will not hear—I tell thee I will not hear!" he choked; and, turning suddenly away, he fell upon the sleepy hostler, who was drawing water at the well, and rated him outrageously, to that astounded worthy's great amazement.

Nick crept into his clothes, and stole away to the kitchen door. There was a red-faced woman there who bade him not to cry—'t would soon be breakfast-time. Nick thought he could not eat at all; but when the savory smell crept out and filled the chilly air, his poor little empty stomach would not be denied, and he ate heartily. Master Heywood sat beside him and gave him the choicest bits from his own trencher; and Carew himself, seeing that he ate, looked strangely pleased, and ordered him a tiny mutton-pie, well spiced. Nick pushed it back indignantly; but Heywood took the pie and cut it open, saying quietly: "Come, lad, the good God made the sheep that is in this pie, not Gaston Carew. Eat it—come, 't will do thee good!" and saw him finish the last crumb.

From Towcester south through Northamptonshire is a pretty country of rolling hills and undulating hollows, ribboned with pebbly rivers, and dotted with fair parks and tofts of ash and elm and oak. Straggling villages now and then were threaded on the road like beads upon a string, and here and there the air was damp and misty from the grassy fens along some winding stream.

It was against nature that a healthy, growing lad should be so much cast down as not to see and be interested in the strange, new, passing world of things about him; and little by little Nick roused from his wretchedness and began to look about him. And a wonder grew within his brain: why had they stolen him?—where were they taking him?—what would they do with him there?—or would they soon let him go again?

Every yellow cloud of dust arising far ahead along the road wrought up his hopes to a Bluebeard pitch, as regularly to fall. First came a cast-off soldier from the war in the Netherlands, rakishly forlorn, his breastplate full of rusty dents, his wild hair worn by his steel cap, swaggering along on a sorry hack with an old belt full of pistolets, and his long sword thumping Rosinante's ribs.

Then a peddling chapman, with a dust-white pack and a cunning Hebrew look, limped by, sulkily doffing his greasy hat. Two sturdy Midland journeymen, in search of southern handicraft, trudged down with tool-bags over their shoulders and stout oak staves in hand. Of wretched beggars and tattered rogues there was an endless string. But of any help no sign.

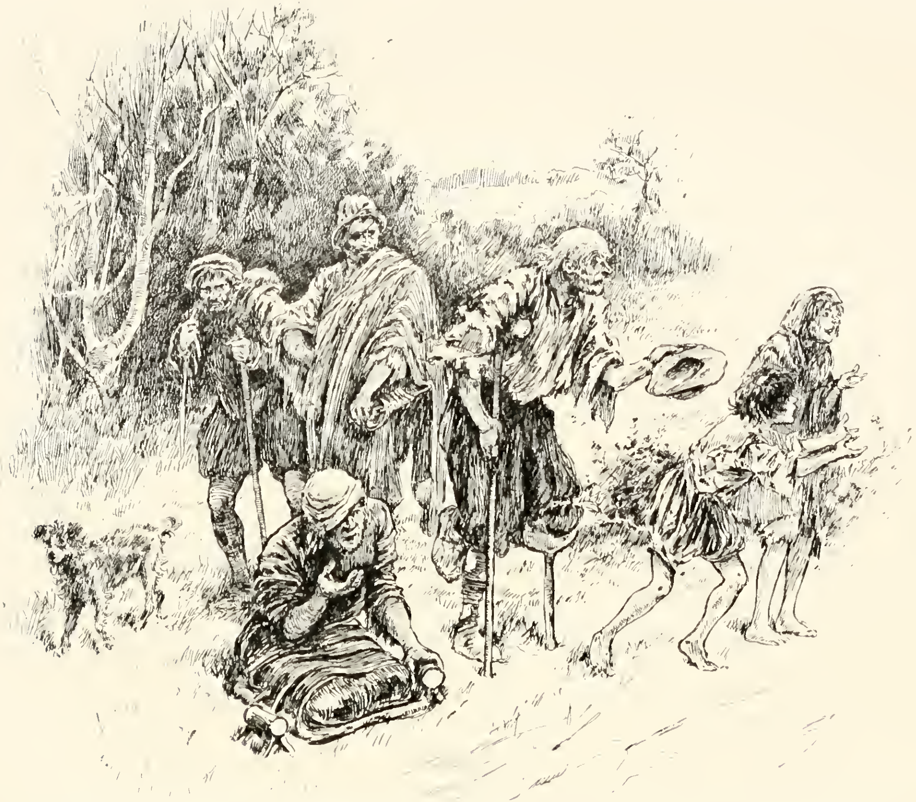
Here and there, like a moving dot, a ploughman turned a belated furrow; or a sweating ditcher leaned upon his reluctant spade and longed for night; or a shepherd, quite as silly as his sheep, gawked up the morning hills. But not a sign of help for Nick.

Once, passing through a little town, he raised a sudden cry of "Help! Help—they be stealing me away!" But at that the master-player and the bandy-legged man waved their hands and set up such a shout that his shrill outcry was not even heard. And the simple country bumpkins, standing in a grinning row like so many Old Aunt Sallys at a fair, pulled off their caps and bowed, thinking it some company of great lords, and fetched a clownish cheer as the players galloped by.

Then the hot dust got into Nick's throat, and he began to cough. Carew started with a look of alarm. "Come, come, Nicholas, this will never do—never do in the world; thou 'lt spoil thy voice."

"I do na care," said Nick.

"But I do," said Carew, sharply. "So we 'll have no more of it!" and he clapped his hand upon his poniard. "But, nay—nay, lad, I did not mean to threaten thee—'t is



"OF WRETCHED BEGGARS AND TATTERED ROGUES THERE WAS AN ENDLESS STRING."

but a jest. Come, smooth thy throat, and do not shriek no more. We play in old St. Albans town to-night, and thou art to sing thy song for us again."

Nick pressed his lips tight shut and shook his head. He would not sing for them again.

"Come, Nick, I 've promised Tom Heywood that thou shouldst sing his song; and, lad, there 's no one left in all the land to sing it if thou 'lt not. Tom doth dearly love thee, lad—why, sure, thou hast seen that! And, Nick, I 've promised all the company that thou wouldst sing Tom's song with us to-night. 'T will break their hearts if thou wilt not. Come, Nick, thou 'lt sing it for us all, and set old Albans town afire!" said Carew, pleadingly.

Nick shook his head.

"Come, Nick," said Carew, coaxingly, "we must hear that sweet voice of thine in Albans town to-night. Come, there 's a dear, good lad, and give us just one little song! Come, act the man and sing, as thou alone in all the world canst sing, in Albans town this night; and on my word, and on the remnant of mine honour, I 'll leave thee go back to Stratford town to-morrow morning!"

"To Stratford—to-morrow?" stammered Nick, with a glad, incredulous cry, while his heart leaped up within him.

"Ay, verily; upon my faith as the fine fag-end of a very proper gentleman—thou shalt go back to Stratford town to-morrow if thou wilt but do thy turn with us to-night."

Nick caught the master-player's arm as they rode along, almost crying for very joy: "Oh, that I will, sir—and do my very best. And, oh, Master Carew, I ha' thought so ill o' thee! Forgive me, sir; I did na know thee well."

Carew winced. Hastily throwing the rein to Nick, he left him to master his own array.

As for Nick, as happy as a lark he learned his new lines as he rode along, Master Carew saying them over to him from the manuscript and over again until he made not a single mistake; and was at great pains to teach him the latest fashionable London way of pronouncing all the words, and of emphasizing his set phrases. "Nay, nay," he would cry laughingly, "not that way, lad; but this: 'Good my lord, I bring a letter from the duke'—as if thou hadst indeed a letter, see, and not an empty fist. And when thou dost hand it to him, do it thus—and not as if thou wert about to stab him in the paunch with a cheese-knife!" And at the end he clapped him upon the back and said again and again that he loved him, that he was a dear, sweet figure of a lad, and that his voice among the rest of England's singers, was like clear honey dropping into a pot of grease.

But it is a long ride from Towcester to St. Albans town in Herts, though the road runs through a pleasant, billowy land of oak-walled lanes, wide pastures, and quiet parks; and the steady jog, jog of the little roan began to rack Nick's tired bones before the day was done.

Yet when they marched into the quaint old town to the blare of trumpets and the crash of the kettledrums, all the long line gaudy with the coat-armour of the Lord High Admiral beneath their flaunting banners, and the horses pricked up their ears and arched their necks and pranced along the crowded streets, Nick, stared at by all the good townsfolk, could not help feeling a thrill of pride that he was one of the great company of players, and sat up very straight and held his head up haughtily as Master Carew did, and bore himself with as lordly an air as he knew how.

But when morning came, and he danced blithely back from washing himself at the horse-trough, all ready to start for home, he found the little roan cross-bridled as before between the master-player's gray and the bandy-legged fellow's sorrel mare.

"What, there! cast him loose," said he to the horse-boy who held the three. "I am not going on with the players—I 'm to go back to Stratford."

"Then ye go afoot," coolly rejoined the other, grinning, "for the hoss goeth on wi' the rest."

"What is this, Master Carew?" cried Nick, indignantly, bursting into the tap-room, where the players were at ale. "They will na let me have the horse, sir. Am I to walk the whole way back to Stratford town?"

"To Stratford?" asked Master Carew, staring with an expression of most innocent surprise, as he set his ale-can down and turned around. "Why, thou art not going to Stratford."

"Not going to Stratford!" gasped Nick, catching at the table with a sinking heart. "Why, sir, ye promised that I should to-day."

"Nay, now, that I did not, Nicholas. I promised thee that thou shouldst go back to-morrow—were not those my very words?"

"Ay, that they were," cried Nick; "and why will ye na leave me go?"

"Why, this is not to-morrow, Nick. Why, see, I cannot leave thee go to-day. Thou knowest that I said to-morrow; and this is not to-morrow—on thine honour, is it now?"

"How can I tell?" cried Nick, despairingly. "Yesterday ye said it would be, and now ye say that it is na. Ye 've twisted it all up so that a body can na tell at all. But there is a falsehood—a wicked, black falsehood—somewhere betwixt you and me, sir; and ye know that I have na lied to you, Master Carew!"

Through the tap-room door he saw the open street and the hills beyond the town. Catching his breath, he sprang across the sill, and ran for the free fields at the top of his speed.

CHAPTER XIV

AT BAY

"AFTER him!—stop him!—catch the rogue!" cried Carew, running out on the cobbles with his ale-can in his hand. "A shilling to the man that brings him back unharmed! No blows, nor clubs, nor stabbing, hark 'e, but catch me the knave straightway; he hath snatched a fortune from my hands!"

At that the hostler, whip in hand, and the tapster with his bit, were off as fast as their legs could carry them, bawling "Stop, thief, stop!" at the top of their lungs; and at their backs every idle varlet about the inn—grooms, stable-boys, and hangers-on—ran whooping, howling, and hallooing like wild huntsmen.

Nick's frightened heart was in his mouth, and his breath came quick and sharp. Tap-a-tap, tap-a-tap went his feet on the cobblestones as down the long street he flew, running as he had never run before.

It seemed as if the whole town bellowed at his back; for windows creaked above his head, and doors banged wildly after him; curs from every alley-way came yelping at his heels; apprentices let go the shutter-bars, and joined in the chase; and near and nearer came the cry of "Stop, thief, stop!" and the kloppety-klop of hob-nailed shoes in wild pursuit.

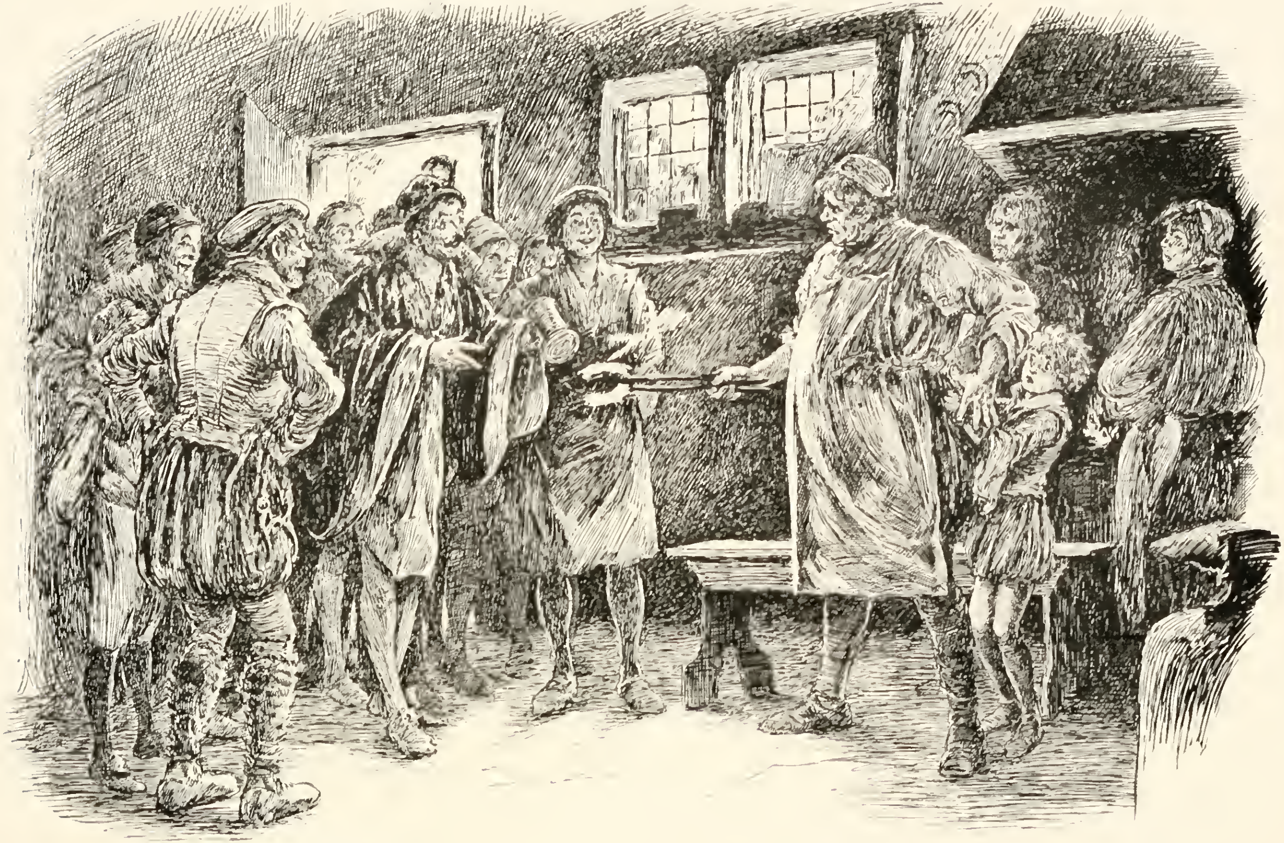
The rabble filled the dark old street from wall to wall, as if a cloud of good-for-naughts had burst above the town; and far in front sped one small, curly-headed lad, running like a frightened fawn. He had lost his cap, and his breath came short, half sobbing in his throat as the sound of footfalls gained upon his ear; but even yet he might have beaten them all and reached the open fields but for the dirt and garbage in the street. Three times he slipped upon a rancid bacon-rind and almost fell; and the third time, as he plunged across the oozing drain, a dog dashed right between his feet.

He staggered, nearly fell, threw out his hand against the house and saved himself; but as he started on again he saw the town-watch, wakened by the uproar, standing with their long staves at the end of the street, barring the way.

The door of a smithy stood open just ahead, with forge-fires glowing and the hammer ringing on the anvil. Nick darted in, past the horses, hostlers, and blacksmith's boys, and caught at the leather apron of the sturdy smith himself.

"Hoo, man, what a dickens!" snorted he, dropping the red-hot shoe on which he was at work, and staring like a startled ox at the panting little fugitive.

"Do na leave them take me!" panted Nick. "They ha' stolen me away from Stratford town and will na leave me go!"



"'NOBODY BREAKS NOBODY'S HEARTS IN OLD JO-OHN SMITHSES SHO-OP,' DRAWLED THE SMITH, IN HIS DEEP VOICE; 'NOR STEALS NOBODY, NOTHER.'"

At that Will Hostler bolted in, red-faced and scant of wind. "Thou young rascal," quoth he, "I have thee now! Come out o' that!" and he tried to take Nick by the collar.

"So-oftly, so-oftly!" rumbled the smith, tweaking up the glowing shoe in his great pincers, and sweeping a sputtering half-circle in front of the cowering lad. "Droive slow through the cro-owd! What hath youngster here did no-ow?"

"He hath stolen a fortune from his master at the Three Lions—and the shilling for him 's mine!"

"Hath stealed a fortune? Whoy, huttlety-tut!" roared the burly smith, turning ponderously upon Nick, who was dodging around him like a boy at tag around a tree. "Whoy, lad," said he, scratching his puzzled head with his great, grimy fingers, "where hast putten it?"

All the rout and the riot now came plunging into the smithy, breathless with the chase. Master Carew himself, his ale-can still clutched in his hand, and bearing himself with a high air of dignity, followed after them, frowning.

"What?" said he, angrily, "have ye earthed the cub and cannot dig him out? Hast caught him there, fellow?"

"Ay, master, that I have!" shouted Will Hostler. "Shilling 's mine, sir."

"Then fetch him out of this hole!" cried Carew, sniffing disdainfully at the low, smoky door.

"But he will na be fetched," stammered the doughty Will, keeping a most respectful distance from the long black pincers and the sputtering shoe with which the farrier stolidly mowed the air round about Nick Attwood and himself.

At that the crowd set up a shout.

Carew thrust fiercely into the press, the louts and loafers giving way. "What, here! Nicholas Attwood," said he, harshly, "come hither."

"Do na leave him take me," begged Nick. "He is not my master; I am not bound out apprentice—they are stealing me away from my own home, and it will break my mother's heart."

"Nobody breaks nobody's hearts in old Jo-ohn Smithses sho-op," drawled the smith, in his deep voice; "nor steals nobody, nother. We be honest-dealing folk in Albans town, an' makes as good horse-shoes as be forged in all England"—and he went placidly on mowing the air with the glimmering shoe.

"Here, fellow, stand aside," commanded Master Carew, haughtily. "Stand aside and let me pass!" As he spoke he clapped his hand upon his poniard with a fierce snarl, showing his white teeth like a wolf-hound.

The men about him fell back with unanimous alacrity, making out each to put himself behind the other. But the huge smith only puffed out his sooty cheeks as if to blow a fly off the next bite of cheese. "So-oftly, so-oftly, muster," drawled he; "do na go to ruffling it here. This shop be mine, and I be free-born Englishman. I 'll stand aside for no swash-buckling rogue on my own ground. Come, now, what wilt thou o' the lad?—and speak thee fair, good muster, or thou 'lt get a dab o' the red-hot shoe." As he spoke he gave the black tongs an extra whirl.

CHAPTER XV

LONDON TOWN

"COME," growled the blacksmith, gripping his tongs, "what wilt thou have o' the lad?"

"What will I have o' the lad?" said Master Carew, mimicking the blacksmith in a most comical way, with a wink at the crowd, as if he had never been angry at all, so quickly could he change his face—"What will I have o' the lad?" and all the crowd laughed. "Why, bless thy gentle heart, good man, I want to turn his farthings into round gold crowns—if thou and thine infernal hot shoe do not make zanies of us all! Why, Master Smith, 't is to London town I 'd take him, and fill his hands with more silver shillings than there be cast-off shoes in thy whole shop."

"La, now, hearken till him!" gaped the smith, staring in amazement.

"And here thou needs must up and spoil it all, because, forsooth, the silly child goes a trifle sick for home and whimpers for his minnie!"

"But the lad saith thou hast stealed him awa-ay from 's ho-ome," rumbled the smith, like a doubtful earthquake; "and we 'll ha' no stealing o' lads awa-ay from ho-ome in County Herts!"

"Nay, that we won't!" cried one. "Hurrah, John Smith—fair play, fair play!" and there came an ugly, threatening murmur from the crowd.

"What! Fair play?" cried Master Carew, turning so sharply about, with his hand upon his poniard, that each made as if it were not he but his neighbor had growled. "Why, sirs, what if I took any one of ye out of your poverty and common clothes down into London town, horseback like a king, and had ye sing before the Queen, and play for earls, and talk with the highest dames in all the land; and fed ye well, and spoke ye fair, and lodged ye soft, and clad ye fine, and wrought the whole town on to cheer ye, and to fill your purses full of gold? What, sir," said he, turning to the gaping farrier—"what if I promised thee to turn thine every word to a silver sixpence, and thy smutty grins to golden angels—what wouldst thou? Knock me in the head with thy dirty sledge, and bawl foul play?"

"Nay, that I 'd not," roared the burly smith, with a stupid, ox-like grin, scratching his tousled head; "I 'd say, 'Go it, bully, and a plague on him that said thee nay!'"

"And yet when I would fill this silly fellow's jerkin full of good gold Harry shovel-boards for the simple drawing of his breath, ye bawl 'Foul play!'"

"What, here! come out, lad," roared the smith, with a great horse-laugh, swinging Nick forward and thwacking him jovially between the shoulders with his brawny hand; "come out, and go along o' the master here,—'t is for thy good,—and ho-ome wull keep, I trow, till thou dost come again."

But Nick hung back, and clung to the blacksmith's grimy arm, crying in despair: "I will na—oh, I will na!"

"Tut, tut!" cried Master Carew. "Come, Nicholas; I mean thee well, I 'll speak thee fair, and I 'll treat thee true"—and he smiled so frankly that even Nick's doubts almost wavered. "Come, I 'll swear it on my hilt," said he.

The smith's brow clouded. "Nay," said he; "we 'll no swearing by hilts or by holies here; the bailiff will na have it, sir."

"Good! then upon mine honour as an Englishman!" cried Carew. "What, how, bullies? Upon mine honour as an Englishman!—how is it? Here we be, all Englishmen together!" and he clapped his hand to Will Hostler's shoulder, whereat Will stood up very straight and looked around, as if all at once he were somebody instead of somewhat less than nobody at all of any consequence. "What!—ye are all for fair play?—and I am for fair play, and good Master Smith, with his beautiful shoe, here, is for fair play! Why, sirs, my bullies, we are all for fair play; and what more can a man ask than good, downright English fair play? Nothing, say I. Fair play first, last, and all the time!" and he waved his hand. "Hurrah for downright English fair play!"

"Hurrah, hurrah!" bellowed the crowd, swept along like bubbles in a flood. "Fair play, says we—English fair play—hurrah!" And those inside waved their hands, and those that were outside tossed up their caps, in sheer delight of good fair play.

"Hurrah, my bullies! That 's the cry!" said Carew, in his hail-fellow-well-met, royal way. "Why, we 're the very best of fellows, and the very fastest friends! Come, all to the old Three Lions inn, and douse a can of brown March brew at my expense. To the Queen, to good fair play, and to all the fine fellows in Albans town!"

And what did the crowd do but raise a shout, like a parcel of school-boys loosed for a holiday, and troop off to the Three Lions inn at Master Carew's heels, Will Hostler and the brawny smith bringing up the rear with Nick between them, hand to collar, half forgotten by the rest, and his heart too low for further grief.

And while the crowd were still roaring over their tankards and cheering good fair play, Master Gaston Carew up with his prisoner into the saddle, and, mounting himself, with the bandy-legged man grinning opposite, shook the dust of old St. Albans from his horse's heels.

"Now, Nicholas Attwood," said he, grimly, as they galloped away, "hark 'e well to what I have to say, and do not let it slip thy mind. I am willed to take thee to London town—dost mark me?—and to London town thou shalt go, warm or cold. By the whistle of the Lord High Admiral, I mean just what I say! So thou mayst take thy choice."

He gripped Nick's shoulder as they rode, and glared into his eyes as if to sear them with his own. Nick heard his poniard grating in its sheath, and shut his eyes so that he might not see the master-player's horrid stare; for the opening and shutting, opening and shutting, of the blue lids made him shudder.

"And what 's more," said Carew, sternly, "I shall call thee Master Skylark from this time forth—dost hear? And when I bid thee go, thou 'lt go; and when I bid thee come, thou 'lt come; and when I say, 'Here, follow me!' thou 'lt follow like a dog to heel!" He drew up his lip until his white teeth showed, and Nick, hearing them gritting together, shrank back dismayed.

"There!" laughed Carew, scornfully. "He that knows better how to tame a vixen or to cozen a pack of gulls, now let him speak!" and said no more until they passed by Chipping Barnet. Then, "Nick," said he, in a quiet, kindly tone, as if they had been friends for years, "this is the place where Warwick fell"; and pointed down the field. "There in the corner of that croft they piled the noble dead like corn upon a threshing-floor. Since then," said he, with quiet irony, "men have stopped making English kings as the Dutch make dolls, of a stick and a poll thereon."

Pleased with hearing his own voice, he would have gone on with many another thing; but seeing that Nick listened not at all to what he said, he ceased, and rode on silently or chatting with the others.

The country through Middlesex was in most part flat, and heavy forests overhung the road from time to time.

There the players slipped their poniards, and rode with rapier in hand; for many a dark deed and cruel robbery had been done along this stretch of Watling street. And as they passed, more than one dark-visaged rogue with branded hand and a price upon his head peered at them from the copses by the way.

In places where the woods crept very near they pressed closer together and rode rapidly; and the horse-boy and the grooms lit up the matches of their pistolets, and laid their harquebuses ready in rest, and blew the creeping sparkle snapping red at every turn; not so much really fearing an attack upon so stout a party of reckless, dashing blades, as being overawed by the great, mysterious silence of the forest, the semi-twilight all about, and the cold, strange-smelling wind that fanned their faces.

The wild spattering of hoofs in water-pools that lay unsucked by the sun in shadowy stretches, the grim silence of the riders, and the wary eying of each covert as they passed, sent a thrill of excitement into Nick's heart too keen for any boy to resist.

Then, too, it was no everyday tale to be stolen away from home. It was a wild, strange thing with a strange, wild sound to it, not altogether terrible or unpleasant to a brave boy's ears in that wonder-filled age, when all the world was turned adventurer, and England led the fore; when Francis Drake and the "Golden Hind," John Hawkins and the "Victory," Frobisher and his cockleshells, were gossip for every English fireside; when the whole world rang with English steel, and the wide sea foamed with English keels, and the air was full of the blaze of the living and the ghosts of the mighty dead. And down in Nick's plucky young English heart there came a spark like that which burns in the soul of a mariner when for the first time an unknown ocean rolls before his eyes.

So he rode on bravely, filled with a sense of daring and the thrill of perils more remote than Master Carew's altogether too adjacent poniard, as well as with a sturdy determination to escape at the first opportunity, in spite of all the master-player's threats.

Up Highgate Hill they rattled in a bracing northeast wind, the rugged country bowling back against the tumbled sky. Far to south a rusty haze had gloomed against the sun like a midday fog, mile after mile; and suddenly, as they topped the range and cleared the last low hill, they saw a city in the south spreading away until it seemed to Nick to girdle half the world and to veil the sky in a reek of murky sea-coal smoke.

"There!" said Carew, reining in the gray, as Nick looked up and felt his heart almost stand still; "since Parma burned old Antwerp, and the Low Countries are dead, there lies the market-heart of all the big round world!"

"London!" cried Nick, and, catching his breath with a quick gasp, sat speechless, staring.

Carew smiled. "Ay, Nick," said he, cheerily; "'t is London town. Pluck up thine heart, lad, and be no more cast down; there lies a New World ready to thine hand. Thou canst win it if thou wilt. Come, let it be thine Indies, thou Francis Drake, and I thy galleon to carry home the spoils! And cheer up. It grieves my heart to see thee sad. Be merry for my sake."

"For thy sake?" gasped Nick, staring blankly in his face. "Why, what hast thou done for me?" A sudden sob surprised him, and he clenched his fists—it was too cruel irony. "Why, sir, if thou wouldst only leave me go!"

"Tut, tut!" cried Carew, angrily. "Still harping on that same old string? Why, from thy waking face I thought thou hadst dropped it long ago. Let thee go? Not for all the wealth in Lombard street! Dost think me a goose-witted gull?—and dost ask what I have done for thee? Thou simpleton! I have made thee rise above the limits of thy wildest dream—have shod thy feet with gold—have filled thy lap with glory—have crowned thine head with fame! And yet, 'What have I done for thee?' Fie! Thou art a stubborn-hearted little fool. But, marry come up! I 'll mend thy mind. I 'll bend thy will to suit my way, or break it in the bending!"

Clapping his hand upon his poniard, he turned his back, and did not speak to Nick again.

And so they came down the Kentish Town road through a meadow-land threaded with flowing streams, the wild hill thickets of Hampstead Heath to right, the huddling villages of Islington, Hoxton, and Clerkenwell to left. And as they passed through Kentish Town, past Primrose Hill into Hampstead way, solitary farm-houses and lowly cottages gave way to burgher dwellings in orderly array, with manor-houses here and there, and in the distance palaces and towers reared their heads above the crowding chimney-pots.

Then the players dressed themselves in fair array, and flung their banners out, and came through Smithfield to Aldersgate, mocking the grim old gibbet there with railing gaiety; and through the gate rode into London town, with a long, loud cheer that brought the people crowding to their doors, and set the shutters creaking everywhere.

Nick was bewildered by the countless shifting gables and the throngs of people flowing onward like a stream, and stunned by the roar that seemed to boil out of the very ground. The horses' hoofs clashed on the unevenly paved street with a noise like a thousand smithies. The houses hung above him till they almost hid the sky, and seemed to be reeling and ready to fall upon his head when he looked up; so that he urged the little roan with his uneasy heels, and wished himself out of this monstrous ruck where the walls were so close together that there was not elbow-room to live, and the air seemed only heat, thick and stifling, full of dust and smells.

Shop after shop, and booth on booth, until Nick wondered where the gardens were; and such a maze of lanes, byways, courts, blind alleys, and passages that his simple country footpath head went all into a tangle, and he could scarcely have told Tottenham Court road from the river Thames.

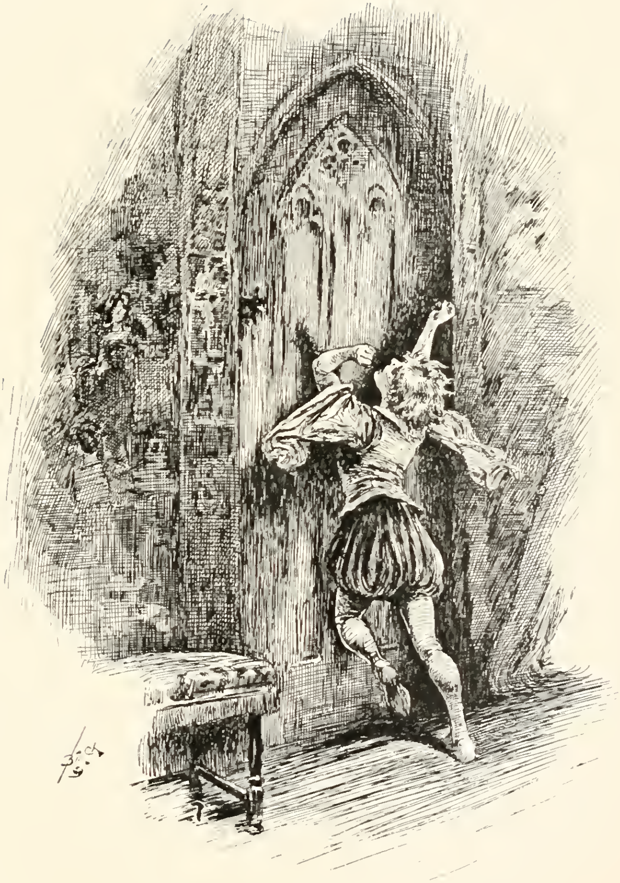
All that he remembered afterward was that, turning from High Holborn into the Farringdon road, he saw a great church, under Ludgate Hill, with spire burned and fallen, and its massive tower, black with age and smoke, staring on the town. But he was too confused to know whither they went or what he saw in passing; for of such a forest of houses he had never even dreamed, with people swarming everywhere like ants upon a hill, and among them all not one kind face he knew. Through the spirit of adventure that had roused him for a time welled up a great heart-sickness for his mother and his home.

Out of a bewildered daze he came at last to realize this much: that the master-player's house was very tall and very dark, standing in a dismal, dirty street, and that it had a gloomy hallway full of shadows that crept and wavered along the wall in the dim light of the late afternoon.

Then the master-player pushed him up a narrow staircase and along a black corridor to a door at the end of the passage, through which he thrust him into a darkness like night, and slammed the door behind him.

Nick heard the bolts shoot heavily, and Master Carew call through the heavy panels: "Now, Jackanapes, sit down and chew the cud of solitude awhile. It may cool thy silly pate for thee, since nothing else will serve. When thou hast found thy common sense, perchance thou 'lt find thy freedom, not before." Then his step went down the corridor, down the stair, through the long hall—a door banged with a hollow sound that echoed through the house, and all was still.

At first, in the utter darkness, Nick could not see at all, and did not move for fear of falling down some awful



“‘LET ME OUT!’ HE CRIED, BEATING UPON THE DOOR.
‘LET ME OUT, I SAY!’”

hole; but as his eyes grew used to the gloom he saw that he was in a little room. The only window was boarded up, but a dim light crept in through narrow cracks and made faint bars across the air. Little motes floated up and down these thin blue bars, wavering in the uncertain light and then lost in the darkness. Upon the floor was a pallet of straw, covered with a coarse sheet, and having a rough coverlet of sheepskin. A round log was the only pillow.

Something moved. Nick, startled, peered into the shadows: it was a strip of ragged tapestry which fluttered on the wall. As he watched it flapping fitfully there came a hollow rattle in the wainscot, and an uncanny sound like the moaning of wind in the chimney.

"Let me out!" he cried, beating upon the door. "Let me out, I say!" A stealthy footstep seemed to go away outside. "Mother, mother!" he cried shrilly, now quite unstrung by fright, and beat frantically upon the door until his hands ached; but no one answered. The window was beyond his reach. Throwing himself upon the hard pallet, he hid his eyes in the coverlet, and cried as if his heart would break.

CHAPTER XVI

MA'M'SELLE CICELY CAREW

HOW long he lay there in a stupor of despair Nick Attwood never knew. It might have been days or weeks, for all that he took heed; for he was thinking of his mother, and there was no room for more.

The night passed by. Then the day came, by the lines of light that crept across the floor. The door was opened at his back, and a trencher of bread and meat thrust in. He did not touch it, and the rats came out of the wall and pulled the meat about, and gnawed holes in the bread, and squeaked, and ran along the wainscot; but he did not care.

The afternoon dragged slowly by, and the creeping light went up the wall until the roofs across the street shut out the sunset. Sometimes Nick waked and sometimes he slept, he scarce knew which nor cared; nor did he hear the bolts grate cautiously, or see the yellow candle-light steal in across the gloom.

"Boy!" said a soft little voice.

He started up and looked around.

For an instant he thought that he was dreaming, and was glad to think that he would waken by and by from what had been so sad a dream, and find himself safe in his own little bed in Stratford town. For the little maid who stood in the doorway was such a one as his eyes had never looked upon before.

She was slight and graceful as a lily of the field, and her skin was white as the purest wax, save where a damask rose-leaf red glowed through her cheeks. Her black hair curled about her slender neck. Her gown was crimson, slashed with gold, cut square across the breast and simply made, with sleeves just elbow-long, wide-mouthed, and lined with creamy silk. Her slippers, too, were of crimson silk, high-heeled, jaunty bits of things; her silken stockings black. In one hand she held a tall brass candlestick, and through the fingers of the other the candle-flame made a ruddy glow like the sun in the heart of a hollyhock. And in the shadow of her hand her eyes looked out, as Nick said long afterward, like stars in a summer night.

Thinking it was all a dream, he sat and stared at her.

"Boy!" she said again, quite gently, but with a quaint little air of reproof, "where are thy manners?"

Nick got up quickly and bowed as best he knew how. If not a dream, this was certainly a princess—and perchance—his heart leaped up—perchance she came to set him free! He wondered who had told her of him? Diccon Field, perhaps, whose father had been Simon Attwood's partner till he died, last Michaelmas. Diccon was in London now, printing books, he had heard. Or maybe it was John, Hal Saddler's older brother. No, it could not be John, for John was with a carrier; and Nick had doubts if carriers were much acquainted at court.

Wondering, he stared, and bowed again.

"Why, boy," said she, with a quaint air of surprise, "thou art a very pretty fellow! Why, indeed, thou lookest like a good boy! Why wilt thou be so bad and break my father's heart?"

"Break thy father's heart?" stammered Nick. "Pr'ythee, who is thy father, Mistress Princess?"

"Nay," said the little maid, simply; "I am no princess. I am Cicely Carew."

"Cicely Carew?" cried Nick, clenching his fists. "Art thou the daughter of that wicked man, Gaston Carew?"

"My father is not wicked!" said she, passionately, drawing back from the threshold with her hand trembling upon the latch. "Thou shalt not say that—I will not speak with thee at all!"

"I do na care! If Master Gaston Carew is thy father, he is the wickedest man in the world!"

"Why, fie, for shame!" she cried, and stamped her little foot. "How darest thou say such a thing?"

"He hath stolen me from home," exclaimed Nick, indignantly; "and I shall never see my mother any more!" With that he choked, and hid his face in his arm against the wall.

The little maid looked at him with an air of troubled surprise, and, coming into the room, touched him on the arm. "There," she said soothingly, "don't cry!" and stroked him gently as one would a little dog that was hurt. "My father will send thee home to thy mother, I know; for he is very kind and good. Some one hath lied to thee about him."

Nick wiped his swollen eyes dubiously upon his sleeve; yet the little maid seemed positive. Perhaps, after all, there was a mistake somewhere.

"Art hungry, boy?" she asked suddenly, spying the empty trencher on the floor. "There is a pasty and a cake in the buttery, and thou shalt have some of it if thou wilt not cry any more. Come, I cannot bear to see thee cry—it makes me weep myself; and that will blear mine eyes, and father will feel bad."

"If he but felt as bad as he hath made me feel—" began Nick, wrathfully; but she laid her little hand across his mouth. It was a very white, soft, sweet little hand.

"Come," said she; "thou art hungry, and it hath made thee cross!" and, with no more ado, took him by the hand and led him down the corridor into a large room where the last daylight shone with a smoky glow.

The walls were wainscoted with many panels, dark, old, and mysterious; and in a burnished copper brazier at the end of the room cinnamon, rosemary, and bay were burning with a pleasant smell. Along the walls were joined-work chests for linen and napery, of brass-bound oak—one a black, old, tragic sea-chest, carved with grim faces and weird griffins, that had been cast up by the North Sea from the wreck of a Spanish galleon of war. The floor was waxed in the French fashion, and was so smooth that Nick could scarcely keep his feet. The windows were high up in the wall, with their heads among the black roof-beams, which with their grotesquely carven brackets were half lost in the dusk. Through the windows Nick could see nothing but a world of chimney-pots.

"Is London town all smoke-pipes?" he asked confusedly.

"Nay," replied the little maid; "there are people."

Pushing a chair up to the table, she bade him sit down. Then pulling a tall, curiously-made stool to the other side of the board, she perched herself upon it like a fairy upon a blade of grass. "Greg!" she called imperiously, "Greg! What, how! Gregory Goole, I say!"

"Yes, ma'm'selle," replied a hoarse voice without; and through a door at the further end of the room came the bandy-legged man with the bow of crimson ribbon in his ear.

Nick turned a little pale; and when the fellow saw him sitting there, he came up hastily, with a look like a crock of sour milk. "Tut, tut! ma'm'selle," said he; "Master Carew will not like this."

She turned upon him with an air of dainty scorn. "Since when hath father left his wits to thee, Gregory Goole? I know his likes as well as thou—and it likes him not to let this poor boy starve, I'll warrant. Go, fetch the pasty and the cake that are in the buttery, with a glass of cordial,—the Certosa cordial,—and that in the shaking of a black sheep's tail, or I will tell my father what thou wottest of." And she looked the very picture of diminutive severity.

"Very good, ma'm'selle; just as ye say," said Gregory, fawning, with very poor grace, however. "But, knave," he snarled, as he turned away, with a black scowl at Nick, "if thou dost venture on any of thy scurvy pranks while I be gone, I 'll break thy pate."

Cicely Carew knitted her brows. "That is a saucy rogue," said she; "but he hath served my father well. And, what is much in London town, he is an honest man withal, though I have caught him at the Spanish wine behind my father's back; so he doth butter his tongue with smooth words when he hath speech with me, for I am the lady of the house." She held up her head with a very pretty pride. "My mother—"

Nick caught his breath, and his eyes filled.

"Nay, boy," said she, gently; "'t is I should weep, not thou; for *my* mother is dead. I do not think I ever saw her that I know," she went on musingly; "but she was a Frenchwoman who served a murdered queen, and she was the loveliest woman that ever lived." Cicely clasped her hands and moved her lips. Nick saw that she was praying, and bent his head.

"Thou art a good boy," she said softly; "my father will like that"; and then went quietly on: "That is why Gregory Goole doth call me 'ma'm'selle'—because my mother was a Frenchwoman. But I am a right English girl for all that; and when they shout, 'God save the Queen!' at the play, why, I do too! And, oh, boy," she cried, "it is a brave thing to hear!" and she clapped her hands with sparkling eyes. "It drove the Spaniards off the sea, my father ofttimes saith."

"Poh!" said Nick, stoutly, for he saw the pasty coming in, "they can na beat us Englishmen!" and with that fell upon the pasty as if it were the Spanish Armada in one lump and he Sir Francis Drake set on to do the job alone.

As he ate his spirits rose again, and he almost forgot that he was stolen from his home, and grew eager to be seeing the wonders of the great town whose ceaseless roar came over the housetops like a distant storm. He was still somewhat in awe of this beautiful, flower-like little maid, and listened in shy silence to the wonderful tales she told: how that she had seen the Queen, who had red hair, and pearls like gooseberries on her cloak; and how the court went down to Greenwich. But the bandy-legged man kept popping his head in at the door, and, after all, Nick was but in a prison-house; so he grew quite dismal after a while.

"Dost truly think thy father will leave me go?" he asked.

"Of course he will," said she. "I cannot see why thou dost hate him so?"

"Why, truly," hesitated Nick, "perhaps it is not thy father that I hate, but only that he will na leave me go. And if he would but leave me go, perhaps I 'd love him very much indeed."

"Good, Nick! thou art a trump!" cried Master Carew's voice suddenly from the further end of the hall, where in spite of all the candles it was dark; and, coming forward, the master-player held out his hands in a most genial way. "Come, lad, thy hand—'t is spoken like a gentleman. Nay, I will kiss thee—for I love thee, Nick, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour!" Taking the boy's half-unwilling hands in his own, he stooped and kissed him upon the forehead.

"Father," said Cicely, gravely, "hast thou forgotten me?"

"Nay, sweetheart, nay," cried Carew, with a wonderful laugh that somehow warmed the cockles of Nick's forlorn heart; and turning quickly, the master-player caught up the little maid and kissed her again and again, so tenderly that Nick was amazed to see how one so cruel could be so kind, and how so good a little maid could love so bad a man; for she twined her arms about his neck, and then lay back with her head upon his shoulder, purring like a kitten in his arms.

"Father," said she, patting his cheek, "some one hath told him naughty things of thee. Come, daddy, say they are not so!"

The master-player's face turned red as flame. He coughed and looked up among the roof-beams. "Why, of course they 're not," said he, uneasily.

"There, boy!" cried she; "I told thee so. Why, daddy, think!—they said that thou hadst stolen him away from his own mother, and wouldst not leave him go!"

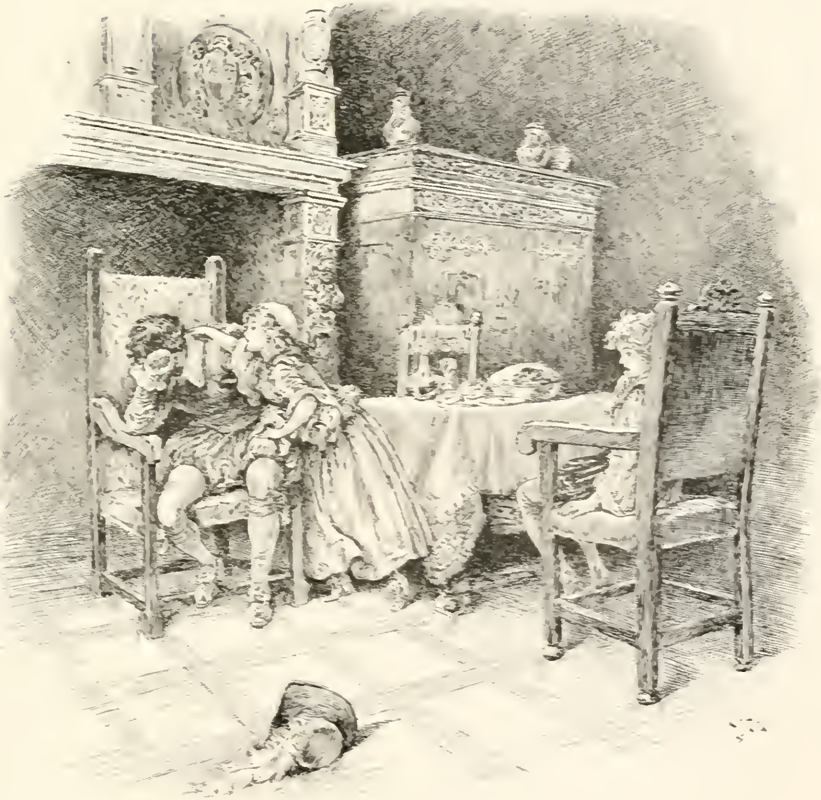
"Hollo!" ejaculated the master-player, abruptly, with a quiver in his voice; "what a hole thou hast made in the pasty, Nick!"

"Ah, daddy," persisted Cicely, "and what a hole it would make in his mother's heart if he had been stolen away!"

"Wouldst like another draught of cordial, Nick?" cried Carew, hurriedly, reaching out for the tall flagon with a trembling hand. "'T is good to cheer the troubled heart, lad. Not that thou hast any reason in the world to let thy heart be troubled," he added hastily. "No, indeed, upon my word; for thou art on the doorstep of a golden-lined success. See, Nick, how the light shines through!" and he tilted up the flagon. "It is one of old Jake Vessaline's Murano-Venetian glasses; a beautiful thing, now, is it not? 'T is good as any made abroad!" but his hand was shaking so that half the cordial missed the cup and ran into a little shimmering pool upon the table-top.

"And thou 'lt send him home again, daddy, wilt thou not?"

"Yes, yes, of course—why, to be sure—we 'll send him anywhere that thou dost say, Golden-heart: to Persia or Cathay—ay, to the far side of the green-cheese moon, or to the court of Tamburlaine the Great," and he laughed a quick, dry, nervous laugh that had no laughter in it. "I had one of De Lannoy's red Bohemian bottles, Nick," he rattled on feverishly; "but that butter-fingered rogue"—he nodded his head at the outer stair—"dropped it, smash! and made a thousand most counterfeit fourpences out of what cost me two pound sterling."



"CICELY DARTED TO HIS SIDE WITH A FRIGHTENED CRY."

"But will ye truly leave me go, sir?" faltered Nick.

"Why, of course—to be sure—yes, certainly—yes, yes. But, Nick, it is too late this night. Why, come, thou couldst not go to-night. See, 't is dark, and thou a stranger in the town. 'T is far to Stratford town—thou couldst not walk it, lad; there will be carriers anon. Come, stay awhile with Cicely and me—we will make thee a right welcome guest!"

"That we will," cried Cicely, clapping her hands. "Oh, do stay; I am so lonely here! The maid is silly, Margot old, and the rats run in the wall."

"And thou must to the theater, my lad, and sing for London town—ay, Nicholas," and Carew's voice rang proudly. "The highest heads in London town must hear that voice of thine, or I shall die unshrift. What! lad?—come all the way from Coventry, and never show that face of thine, nor let them hear thy skylark's song? Why, 't were a shame! And, Nick, my lord the Admiral shall hear thee sing when he comes home again; perchance the Queen herself. Why, Nick, of course thou 'lt sing. Thou hast not heart to say thou wilt not sing—even for me whom thou hatest."

Nick smiled in spite of himself, for Cicely was leaning on the arm of his chair, devouring him with her great dark eyes. "Dost truly, truly sing?" she asked.

Nick laughed and blushed, and Carew laughed. "What, doth he sing? Why, Nick, come, tune that skylark note of thine for little Golden-heart and me. 'T will make her think she hears the birds in verity—and, Nick, the lass hath never seen a bird that sang, except within a cage. Nay, lad, this is no cage!" he cried, as Nick looked about and sighed. "We will make it very home for thee—will Cicely and I."

"That we will!" cried Cicely. "Come, boy, sing for me—my mother used to sing."

At that Gaston Carew went white as a sheet, and put his hand quickly up to his face. Cicely darted to his side with a frightened cry, and caught his hand away. He tried to smile, but it was a ghastly attempt. "Tush, tush! little one; 't was something stung me!" said he, huskily, "Sing, Nicholas, I beg of thee!"

There was such a sudden world of weariness and sorrow in his voice that Nick felt a pity for he knew not what, and lifting up his clear young voice, he sang the quaint old madrigal.

Carew sat with his face in his hand, and after it was done arose unsteadily and said, "Come, Golden-heart; 't is music such as charmeth care and lureth sleep out of her dark valley—we must be trotting off to bed."

That night Nick slept upon a better bed, with a sheet and a blue serge coverlet, and a pillow stuffed with chaff.

But as he drifted off into a troubled dreamland, he heard the door-bolt throb into its socket, and knew that he was fastened in.

CHAPTER XVII

CAREW'S OFFER

NEXT morning Carew donned his plum-colored cloak, and with Nick's hand held tightly in his own went out of the door and down the steps into a drifting fog which filled the street, the bandy-legged man with the ribbon in his ear following close upon their heels.

People passed them like shadows in the mist, and all the houses were a blur until they came into a wide, open place where the wind blew free above a wall with many great gates.

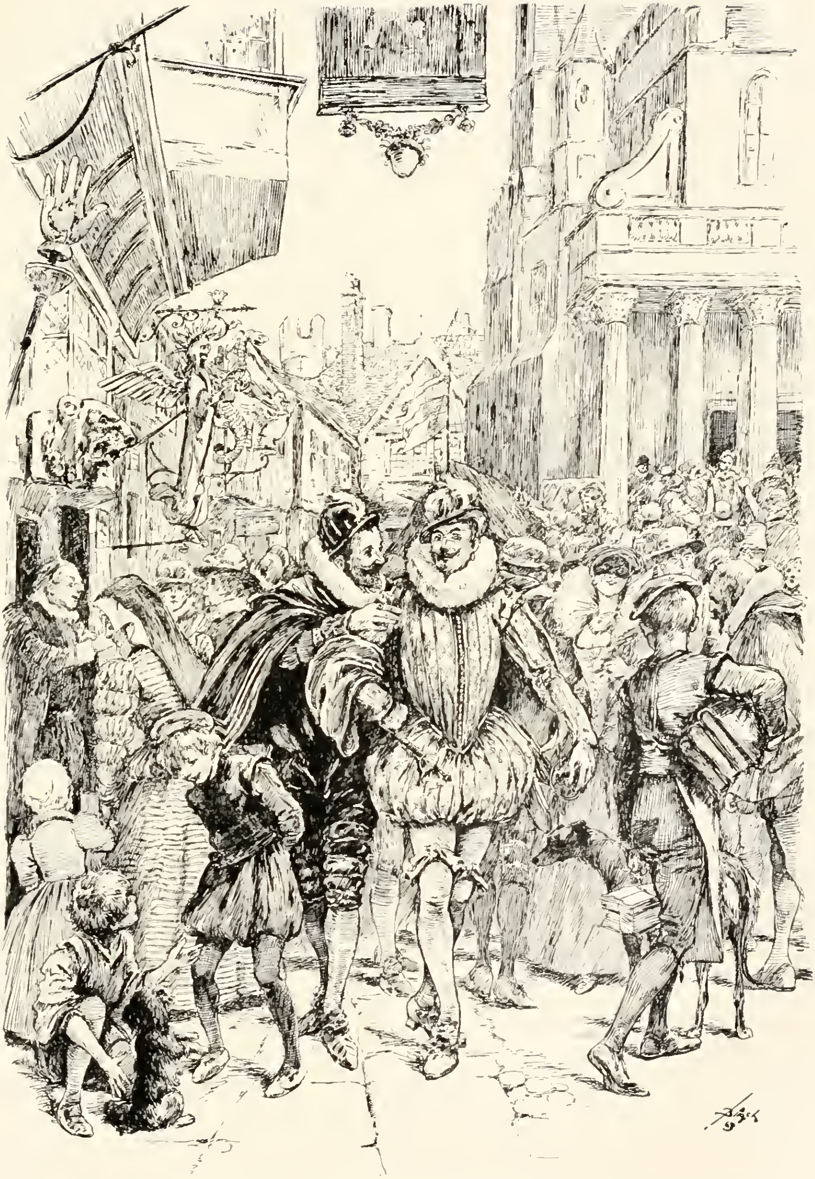
In the middle of this open place a huge gray building stood, staring out over the housetops—a great cathedral, wonderful and old. Its walls were dark with time and smoke and damp, and the lofty tower that rose above it was in part but a hollow shell split by lightning and blackened by fire. But crowded between its massive buttresses were booths and chapmen's stalls; against its hoary side a small church leaned like a child against a mother's breast; and in and round about it eddied a throng of men like ants upon a busy hill.

All around the outer square were shops with gilded fronts and most amazing signs: golden angels with outstretched wings, tiger heads, bears, brazen serpents, and silver cranes; and in and out of the shop-doors darted apprentices with new-bound books and fresh-printed slips; for this was old St. Paul's, the meeting-place of London town, and in Paul's Yard the printers and the bookmen dealt.

With a deal of elbowing the master-player came up the broad steps into the cathedral, and down the aisle to the pillars where the merchant-tailors stood with table-books in hand, and there ordered a brand-new suit of clothes for Nick of old Roger Shearman, the best cloth-cutter in Threadneedle street.

While they were deep in silk and silver thread, Haerlem linen, and Leyden camelot, Nick stared about him half aghast; for it was to him little less than monstrous to see a church so thronged with merchants plying their trades as if the place were no more sacred than a booth in the public square.

The long nave of the cathedral was crowded with mercers from Cheapside, drapers from Throgmorton street, stationers from Ludgate Hill, and goldsmiths from Foster lane, hats on, loud-voiced, and using the very font itself for a counter. By the columns beyond, sly, foxy-faced lawyers hobnobbed; and on long benches by the wall, cast-off serving-men, varlets, grooms, pastry-bakers, and pages sat, waiting to be hired by some new master. Besides these who came on business there was a host of gal-



"THIS WAS OLD ST. PAUL'S, THE MEETING-PLACE OF LONDON TOWN."

lants in gold-laced silk and velvet promenading up and down the aisle, with no business there at all but to show their faces and their clothes. And all about were solemn shrines and monuments and tombs, and overhead a splendid window burned like a wheel of fire in the eastern wall.

While Nick stared, speechless, a party of the Admiral's players came strolling by, their heads half hidden in their huge starched ruffs, and with prodigious swords that would have dragged along the ground had they not been cocked up behind so fiercely in the air. Seeing Master Carew and the boy, they stopped in passing to greet them gaily.

Master Heywood was there, and bowed to Nick with a kindly smile. His companion was a handsome, proud-mouthed man with a blue, smooth-shaven face and a jet-black periwig. Him Carew drew aside and spoke with in an earnest undertone. As he talked, the other began to stare at Nick as if he were some curious thing in a cage.

"Upon my soul," said Carew, "ye never heard the like of it. He hath a voice as sweet and clear as if Puck had burst a honey-bag in his throat."

"No doubt," replied the other, carelessly; "and all the birds will hide their heads when he begins to sing. But we don't want him, Carew—not if he had a voice like Miriam the Jew. Henslowe has just bought little Jem Bristow of Will Augusten for eight pound sterling, and business is too bad to warrant any more."

"Who spoke of selling?" said Carew, sharply. "Don't flatter your chances so, Master Alleyn. I would n't sell the boy for a world full of Jem Bristows. Why, his mouth is a mint where common words are coined into gold! Sell him? I think I see myself in Bedlam for a fool! Nay, Master Alleyn, what I am coming at is this: I 'll place him at the Rose, to do his turn in the play with the rest of us, or out of it alone, as ye choose, for one fourth of the whole receipts over and above my old share in the venture. Do ye take me?"

"Take you? One fourth the whole receipts? Zounds! man, do ye think we have a spigot in El Dorado?"

"Tush! Master Alleyn, don't make a poor mouth; you 're none so needy. You and Henslowe have made a heap of money out of us all."

"And what of that? Yesterday's butter won't smooth to-day's bread. 'T is absurd of you, Carew, to ask one fourth and leave all the risk on us, with the outlook as it is! Here 's that fellow Langley has built a new play-house in Paris Garden, nearer to the landing than we are, and is stealing our business most scurvily!"

Carew shrugged his shoulders.

"And what 's more, the very comedy for which Ben Jonson left us, because we would not put it on, has been taken up by the Burbages on Will Shakspere's say-so, and is running famously at the Curtain."

"I told you so, Master Alleyn, when the fellow was fresh from the Netherlands," said Carew; "but your ears were plugged with your own conceit. Young Jonson is no flatfish, if he did lay brick; he 's a plum worth anybody's picking."

"But, plague take it, Carew, those Burbages have all the plums! Since they weaned Will Shakspere from us everything has gone wrong. Kemp has left us; old John Lowin, too; and now the Lord Mayor and Privy Council have soured on the play again and forbidden all playing on the Bankside, outside the City or no."

Carew whistled softly to himself.

"And since my Lord Chamberlain has been patron of the Burbages he will not so much as turn a hand to revive the old game of bull- and bear-baiting, and Phil and I have kept the Queen's bulldogs going on a twelvemonth now at our own expense—a pretty canker on our profits! Why, Carew, as Will Shakspere used to say, 'One woe doth tread the other's heels, so fast they follow!' And what 's to do?"

"What 's to do?" said Carew. "Why, I 've told ye what 's to do. Ye 've heard Will say, 'There is a tide leads on to fortune if ye take it at the flood'? Well, Master Alleyn, here 's the tide, and at the flood. I have offered you an argosy. Will ye sail or stick in the mud? Ye 'll never have such a chance again. Come, one fourth over my old share, and I will fill your purse so full of gold that it will gape like a stuffed toad. His is the sweetest skylark voice that ever sugared ears!"

"But, man, man, one fourth!"

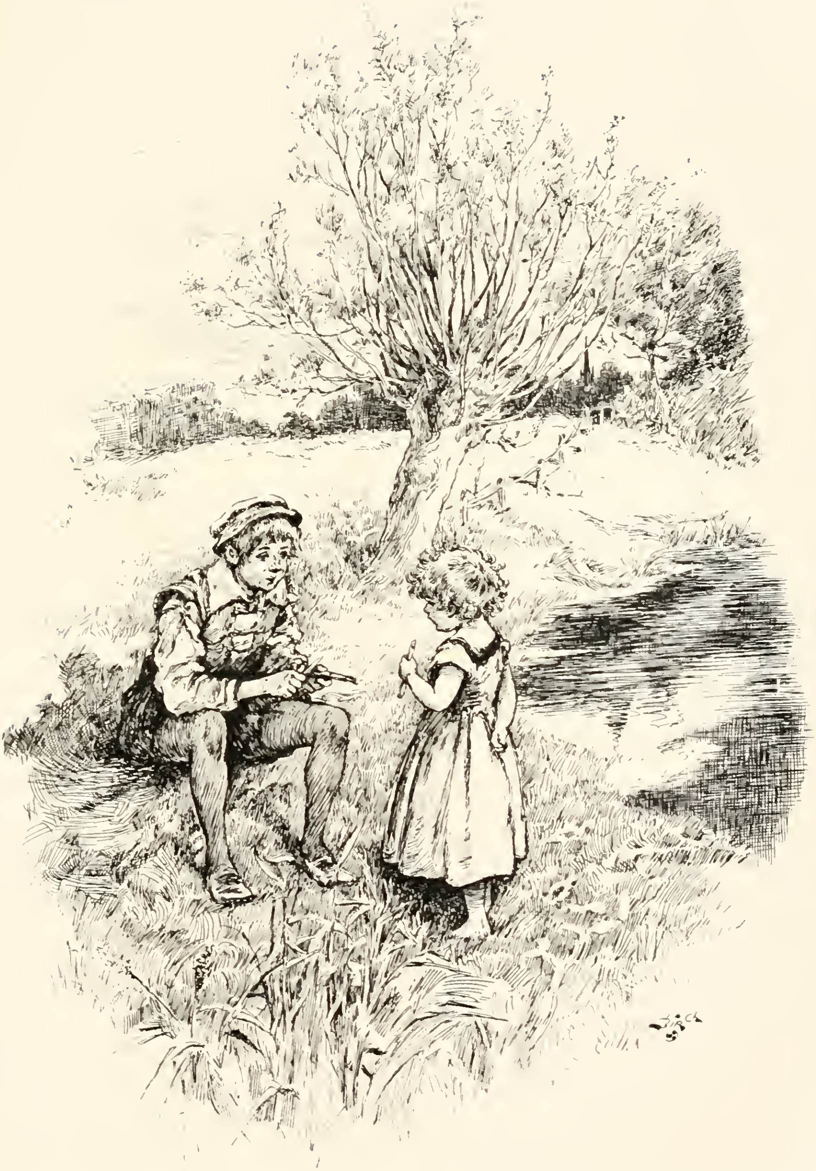
"Better one fourth than lose it all," said Carew. "But, pshaw! Master Ned Alleyn, I 'll not beg a man to swim that 's bent on drowning! We will be at the play-house this afternoon; mayhap thou 'lt have thought better of it by then." With a curt bow he was off through the crowd, Nick's hand in his own clenched very tight.

They had hard work getting down the steps, for two hot-headed gallants were quarreling there as to who should come up first, and there was a great press. But Carew scowled and showed his teeth, and clenched his poniard-hilt so fiercely that the commoners fell away and let them down.

Nick's eyes were hungry for the printers' stalls where ballad-sheets were sold for a penny, and where the books were piled along the shelves until he wondered if all London were turned printer. He looked about to see if he might chance upon Diccon Field; but Carew came so quickly through the crowd that Nick had not time to recognize Diccon if he had been there. Diccon had often made Nick whistles from the pollard willows along the Avon below the tannery when Nick was a toddler in smocks, and the lad thought he would like to see him before going back to Stratford. Then, too, his mother had always liked Diccon Field, and would be glad to hear from him. At thought of his mother he gave a happy little skip; and as they turned into Paternoster Row, "Master Carew," said he, "how soon shall I go home?"

Carew walked a little faster.

There had arisen a sound of shouting and a trampling of feet. The constables had taken a purse-cutting thief, and were coming up to the Newgate prison with a great rabble behind them. The fellow's head was broken, and his haggard face was all screwed up with pain; but that



"DICCON HAD OFTEN MADE NICK WHISTLES FROM THE WILLOWS ALONG THE AVON WHEN NICK WAS A TODDLER."

did not stop the boys from hooting at him, and asking in mockery how he thought he would like to be hanged and to dance on nothing at Tyburn Hill.

"Did ye hear me, Master Carew?" asked Nick.

The master-player stepped aside a moment into a doorway to let the mob go by, and then strode on.

Nick tried again: "I pray thee, sir—"

"Do not pray me," said Carew, sharply; "I am no Indian idol."

"But, good Master Carew—"

"Nor call me good—I am not good."

"But, Master Carew," faltered Nick, with a sinking sensation around his heart, "when will ye leave me go home?"

The master-player did not reply, but strode on rapidly, gnawing his mustache.

CHAPTER XVIII

MASTER HEYWOOD PROTESTS

IT was a cold, raw day. All morning long the sun had shone through the choking fog as the candle-flame through the dingy yellow horn of an old stable-lantern. But at noon a wind sprang up that drove the mist through London streets in streaks and strings mixed with smoke and the reek of steaming roofs. Now and then the blue gleamed through in ragged patches overhead; so that all the town turned out on pleasure bent, not minding if it rained stewed turnips, so they saw the sky.

But the fog still sifted through the streets, and all was damp and sticky to the touch, so Cicely was left behind to loneliness and disappointment.

Nick and the master-player came down Ludgate Hill to Blackfriars landing in a stream of merrymakers, high and low, rich and poor, faring forth to London's greatest thoroughfare, the Thames; and as the river and the noble mansions along the Strand came into view, Nick's heart beat fast. It was a sight to stir the pulse.

Far down the stream, the grim old Tower loomed above the drifting mist; and, higher up, old London Bridge, lined with tall houses, stretched from shore to shore. There were towers on it with domes and gilded vanes, and the river foamed and roared under it, strangled by the piers. From the dock at St. Mary Averies by the Bridge to Bargehouse stairs, the landing-stages all along the river-bank were thronged with boats; and to and fro across the stream, wherries, punts, barges, and water-craft of every kind were plying busily. In middle stream sail-boats tugged along with creaking sweeps, or brown-sailed trading-vessels slipped away to sea, with costly freight for Muscovy, Turkey, and the Levant. And amid the countless water-craft a multitude of stately swans swept here and there like snow-flakes on the dusky river.

Nick sniffed at the air, for it was full of strange odors—the smell of breweries, of pitchy oakum, Norway tar, spices from hot countries, resinous woods, and chilly whiffs from the water; and as they came out along the wharf, there were brown-faced, hard-eyed sailors there, who had been to the New World—wild fellows with silver rings in their ears and a swaggering stagger in their petticoated legs. Some of them held short, crooked brown tubes between their lips, and puffed great clouds of pale brown smoke from their noses in a most amazing way.

Broad-beamed Dutchmen, too, were there, and swarthy Spanish renegades, with sturdy craftsmen of the City guilds and stalwart yeomen of the guard in the Queen's rich livery.

But ere Nick had fairly begun to stare, confused by such a rout, Carew had hailed a wherry, and they were half-way over to the Southwark side.

Landing amid a deafening din of watermen bawling hoarsely for a place along the Paris Garden stairs, the master-player hurried up the lane through the noisy crowd. Some were faring afoot into Surrey, and some to green St. George's Fields to buy fresh fruit and milk from the farm-houses and to picnic on the grass. Some turned aside to the Falcon Inn for a bit of cheese and ale, and others to the play-houses beyond the trees and fishing-ponds. And coming down from the inn they met a crowd of players, with Master Tom Heywood at their head, frolicking and cantering along like so many overgrown school-boys.

"So we are to have thee with us awhile?" said Heywood, and put his arm around Nick's shoulders as they trooped along.

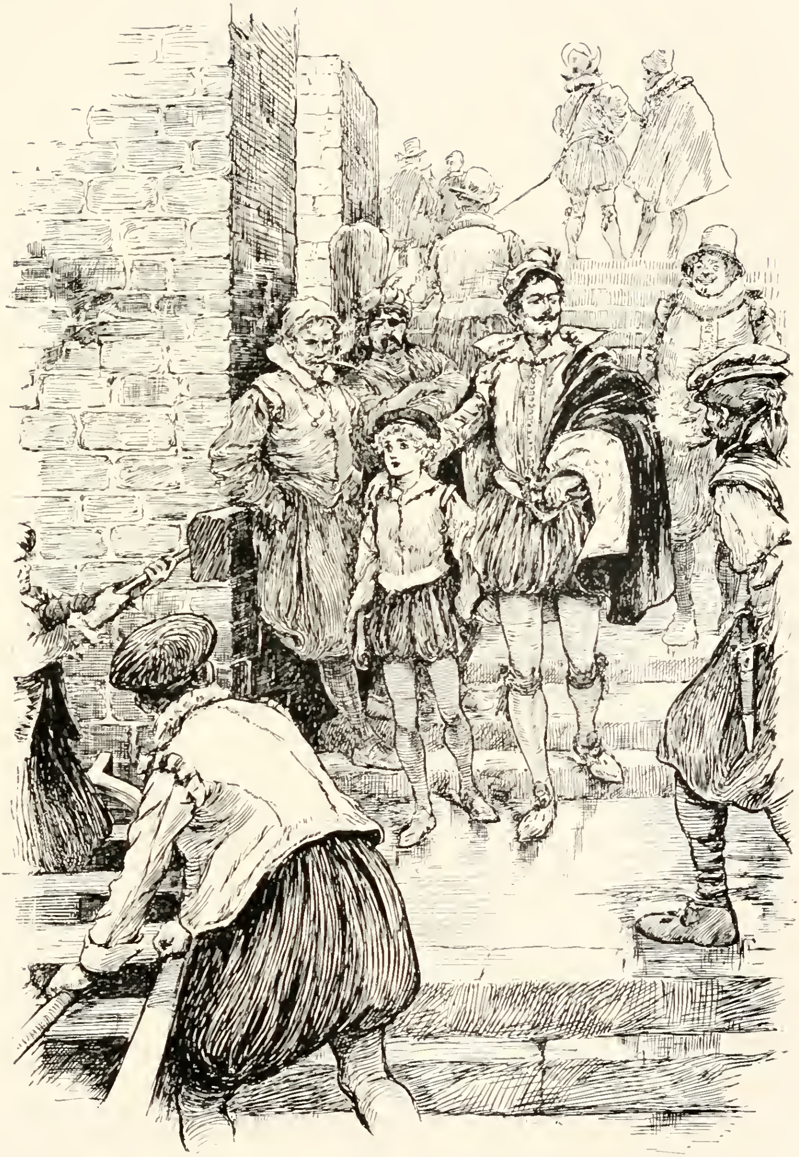
"Awhile, sir, yes," replied Nick, nodding; "but I am going home soon, Master Carew says."

"Carew," said Heywood, suddenly turning, "how can ye have the heart?"

"Come, Heywood," quoth the master-player, curtly, though his whole face colored up, "I have heard enough of this. Will ye please to mind your own affairs?"

The writer of comedies lifted his brows. "Very well," he answered quietly; "but, lad, this much for thee," said he, turning to Nick, "if ever thou dost need a friend, Tom Heywood 's one will never speak thee false."

"Sir!" cried Carew, clapping his hand upon his poniard.



NICK AND MASTER CAREW AT BLACKFRIARS LANDING.

Heywood looked up steadily. "How? Wilt thou quarrel with me, Carew? What ugly poison hath been filtered through thy wits? Why, thou art even falser than I thought! Quarrel with me, who took thy new-born child from her dying mother's arms when thou wert fast in Newgate gaol?"

Carew's angry face turned sickly gray. He made as if to speak, but no sound came. He shut his eyes and pushed out his hand in the air as if to stop the voice of the writer of comedies.

"Come," said Heywood, with deep feeling; "thou canst not quarrel with me yet—nay, though thou dost try thy very worst. It would be a sorry story for my soul or thine to tell to hers."

Carew groaned. The rest of the players had passed on, and the three stood there alone. "Don't, Tom, don't!" he cried.

"Then how can ye have the heart?" the other asked again.

The master-player lifted up his head, and his lips were trembling. "'T is not the heart, Tom," he cried bitterly, "upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour! 'T is the head which doeth this. For, Tom, I cannot leave him go. Why, Tom, hast thou not heard him sing? A voice which would call back the very dead that we have loved if they might only hear. Why, Tom, 't is worth a thousand pound! How can I leave him go?"

"Oh, fie for shame upon the man I took thee for!" cried Heywood.

"But, Tom," cried Carew, brokenly, "look it straightly in the face; I am no such player as I was,—this reckless life hath done the trick for me, Tom,—and here is ruin staring Henslowe and Alleyn in the eye. They cannot keep me master if their luck doth not change soon; and Burbage would not have me as a gift. So, Tom, what is there left to do? How can I shift without the boy? Nay, Tom, it will not serve. There 's Cicely—not one penny laid by for her against a rainy day; and I 'll be gone, Tom, I 'll be gone—it is not morning all day long—we cannot last forever. Nay, I cannot leave him go!"

"But, sir," broke in Nick, wretchedly, holding fast to Heywood's arm, "ye said that I should go!"

"Said!" cried the master-player, with a bitter smile; "why, Nick, I 'd say ten times more in one little minute just to hear thee sing than I would stand to in a month of Easters afterward. Come, Nick, be fair. I 'll feed thee full and dress thee well and treat thee true—all for that song of thine."

"But, sir, my mother—"

"Why, Carew, hath the boy a mother, too?" cried the writer of comedies.

"Now, Heywood, on thy soul, no more of this!" cried the master-player, with quivering lips. "Ye will make me out no man, or else a fiend. I cannot let the fellow go—I will not let him go." His hands were twitching, and his face was pale, but his lips were set determinedly. "And, Tom, there 's that within me will not abide even *thy* pestering. So come, no more of it! Upon my soul, I sour over soon!"

So they came on gloomily past the bear-houses and the Queen's kennels. The river-wind was full of the wild smell of the bears; but what were bears to poor Nick, whose last faint hope that the master-player meant to keep his word and send him home again was gone?

They passed the Paris Garden and the tall round play-house that Francis Langley had just built. A blood-red banner flaunted overhead, with a large white swan painted thereon; but Nick saw neither the play-house nor the swan; he saw only, deep in his heart, a little gable-roof among old elms, with blue smoke curling softly up among the rippling leaves; an open door with tall pink hollyhocks beside it; and in the door, watching for him till he came again, his own mother's face. He began to cry silently.

"Nay, Nick, my lad, don't cry," said Heywood, gently; "'t will only make bad matters worse. *Never* is a weary while; but the longest lane will turn at last: some day thou 'lt find thine home again all in the twinkling of an eye. Why, Nick, 't is England still, and thou an Englishman. Come, give the world as good as it can send."

Nick raised his head again, and, throwing the hair back from his eyes, walked stoutly along, though the tears still trickled down his cheeks.

"Sing thou my songs," said Heywood, heartily, "and I will be thy friend—let this be thine earnest." As he spoke he slipped upon the boy's finger a gold ring with a green stone in it cut with a tall tree: this was his seal.

They had now come through the garden to the Rose Theatre, where the Lord Admiral's company played; and

Carew was himself again. "Come, Nicholas," said he, half jestingly, "be done with thy doleful dumps—care killed a cat, they say, lad. Why, if thy hateful looks could stab, I 'd be a dead man forty times. Come, cheer up, lad, that I may know thou lovest me."

"But I do na love thee!" cried Nick, indignantly.

"Tut! Do not be so dour. Thou 'lt soon be envied by ten thousand men. Come, don't make a face at thy good fortune as though it were a tripe fried in tar. Come, lad, be pleased; thou 'lt be the pet of every high-born dame in London town."

"I 'd rather be my mother's boy," Nick answered simply.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ROSE PLAY-HOUSE

THE play-house was an eight-sided, three-storied, tower-like building of oak and plastered lath, upon a low foundation of yellow brick. Two outside stairways ran around the wall, and the roof was of bright-red English tiles with a blue lead gutter at the eaves. There was a little turret, from the top of which a tall ash stave went up; and on the stave, whenever there was to be a play, there floated a great white flag on which was a crimson rose with a golden heart, just like the one that Nick with such delight had seen come up the Oxford road a few short days before.

Under the stairway was a narrow door marked "For the Playeres Onelie"; and in the doorway stood a shrewd-faced, common-looking man, writing upon a tablet which he held in his hand. There was a case of quills at his side, with one of which he was scratching busily, now and then prodding the ink-horn at his girdle. He held his tongue in his cheek, and moved his head about as the pen formed the letters: he was no expert penman, this Phil Henslowe, the stager of plays.

He looked up as they came to the step.

"A poor trip, Carew," said he, running his finger down the column of figures he was adding. "The play was hardly worth the candle—cleared but five pound; and then, after I had paid the carman three shilling fip to bring the stuff down from the City, 't was lost in the river from the barge at Paul's wharf! A good two pound."

"Hard luck!" said Carew.

"Hard? Adamantine, I say! Why, 't is very stones for luck, and the whole road rocky! Here 's Burbage, Condell, and Will Shakspere ha' rebuilt Blackfriars playhouse in famous shape; and, marry, where are we?"

Nick started. An idea came creeping into his head. Will Shakspere had married his mother's own cousin, Anne Hathaway of Shottery; and he had often heard his mother say that Master Shakspere had ever been her own good friend when they were young.

"He and Jonson be thick as thieves," said Henslowe; "and Chettle says that Will hath near done the book of a new play for the autumn—a master fine thing!—'Romulus and Juliana,' or something of that Italian sort, to follow Ben Jonson's comedy. Ned Alleyn played a sweet fool about Ben's comedy. Called it monstrous bad; and now it has taken the money out of our mouths to the tune of nine pound six the day—and here, while ye were gone, I ha' played my Lord of Pembroke's men in your 'Robin Hood,' Heywood, to scant twelve shilling in the house!"

Heywood flushed.

"Nay, Tom, don't be nettled; 't is not the fault of thy play. There 's naught will serve. We 've tried old Marlowe and Robin Greene, Peele, Nash, and all the rest; but, what! they will not do—'t is Shakspere, Shakspere; our City flat-caps will ha' nothing but Shakspere!"

Nick listened eagerly. Master Will Shakspere must indeed be somebody in London town! He stared across into the drifting cloud of mist and smoke which hid the city like a pall, and wondered how and where, in that terrible hive of more than a hundred thousand men, he could find one man.

"I tell thee, Tom Heywood, there 's some magic in the fellow, or my name 's not Henslowe!" cried the manager. "His very words bewitch one's wits as nothing else can do. Why, I 've tried them with 'Pierce Penniless,' 'Groat's Worth of Wit,' 'Friar Bacon,' 'Orlando,' and the 'Battle of Alcazar.' Why, tush! they will not even listen! And here I 've put Martin Gosset into purple and gold, and Jemmy Donstall into a peach-colored gown laid down with silver-gilt, for 'Volteger'; and what? Why, we play to empty stools; and the rascals owe me for those costumes yet—sixty shillings full! A murrain on Burbage and Will Shakspere too!—but I wish we had him back again. We 'd make their old Blackfriars sick!" He shook his fist at a great gray pile of buildings that rose above the rest out of the fog by the landing-place beyond the river.

Nick stared. *That* the play-house of Master Shakspere and the Burbages? Will Shakspere playing there, just across the river? Oh, if Nick could only find him, he would not let the son of his wife's own cousin be stolen away!

Nick looked around quickly.

The play-house stood a bowshot from the river, in the open fields. There was a moated manor-house near by, and beyond it a little stream with some men fishing. Between the play-house and the Thames were gardens and trees, and a thin fringe of buildings along the bank by the landings. It was not far, and there were places where one could get a boat every fifty yards or so at the Bankside.

But—"Come in, come in," said Henslowe. "Growling never fed a dog; and we must be doing."

"Go ahead, Nick," said Carew, pushing him by the shoulder, and they all went in. The door opened on a flight of stairs leading to the lowest gallery at the right of the stage, where the orchestra sat. A man was tuning up a viol as they came in.

"I want you to hear this boy sing," said Carew to Henslowe. "'T is the best thing ye ever lent ear to."

"Oh, this is the boy?" said the manager, staring at Nick. "Why, Alleyn told me he was a country gawk!"

"He lied, then," said Carew, very shortly. "'T was cheaper than the truth at my price. There, Nick, go look about the place—we have business."

Nick went slowly along the gallery. His hands were beginning to tremble as he put them out touching the stools. Along the rail were ornamental columns which supported the upper galleries and looked like beautiful blue-veined white marble; but when he took hold of them to steady himself he found they were only painted wood.

There were two galleries above. They ran all around the inside of the building, like the porches of the inn at Coventry, and he could see them across the house. There were no windows in the gallery where he was, but there were some in the second one. They looked high. He went on around the gallery until he came to some steps going down into the open space in the center of the building. The stage was already set up on the trestles, and the carpenters were putting a shelter-roof over it on copper-gilt pillars; for it was beginning to drizzle, and the middle of the play-house was open to the sky.

The spectators were already coming into the pit at a penny apiece, although the play would not begin until early evening. Those for the galleries paid another penny to a man in a red cloak at the foot of the stairs where Nick was standing. There was a great uproar at the entrance. Some apprentices had caught a cutpurse in the crowd, and were beating him unmercifully. Every one pushed and shoved about, cursing the thief, and those near enough kicked and struck him.

Nick looked back. Carew and the manager had gone into the tiring-room behind the stage. He took hold of the side-rail and started down the steps. The man in the red cloak looked up. "Go back there," said he, sharply; "there 's enough down here now." Nick went on around the gallery.

At the back of the stage were two doors for the players, and between them hung a painted cloth or arras behind which the prompter stood. Over these doors were two plastered rooms, twopenny private boxes for gentlefolk. In one of them were three young men and a beautiful girl, wonderfully dressed. The men were speaking to her, but she looked down at Nick instead. "What a pretty boy!" she said, and tossed him a flower that one of the men had just given her. It fell at Nick's feet. He started back, looking up. The girl smiled, so he took off his cap and bowed; but the men looked sour.

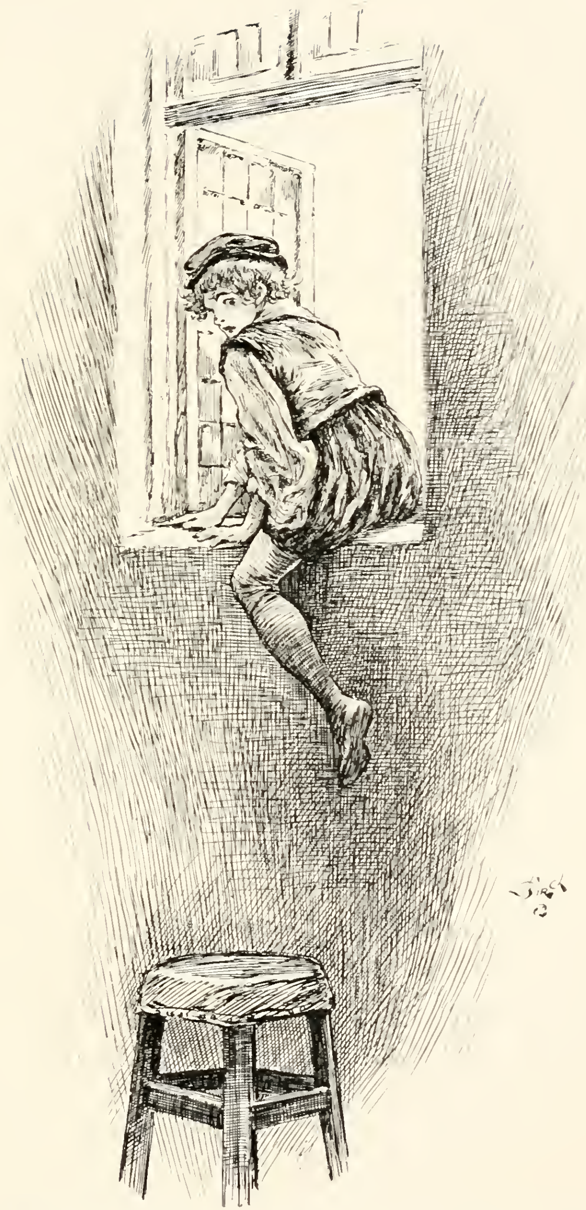
At the side of the stage was a screen with long leather fire-buckets and a pole-ax hanging upon it, and behind it was a door through which Nick saw the river and the gray walls of the old Dominican friary. As he came down to it, some one thrust out a staff and barred the way. It was the bandy-legged man with the ribbon in his ear. Nick looked out longingly; it seemed so near!

"Master Carew saith thou art not to stir outside—dost hear?" said the bandy-legged man.

"Ay," said Nick, and turned back.

There was a narrow stairway leading to the second gallery. He went up softly. There was no one in the gallery, and there was a window on the side next to the river; he had seen it from below. He went toward it slowly that he might not arouse suspicion. It was above his head.

There were stools for hire standing near. He brought one and set it under the window. It stood unevenly upon the floor, and made a wabbling noise. He was afraid



"NICK PUT ONE LEG OVER THE SILL AND LOOKED BACK."

some one would hear him; but the apprentices in the pit were rattling dice, and two or three gentlemen's pages were wrangling for the best places on the platform; while, to add to the general riot, two young gallants had brought gamecocks and were fighting them in one corner, amid such a whooping and swashing that one could hardly have heard the skies fall.

A printer's man was bawling, "Will ye buy a new book?" and the fruit-sellers, too, were raising such a cry of "Apples, cherries, cakes, and ale!" that the little noise Nick might make would be lost in the wild confusion.

Master Carew and the manager had not come out of the tiring-room. Nick got up on the stool and looked out. It was not very far to the ground—not so far as from the top of the big haycock in Master John Combe's field from which he had often jumped.

The sill was just breast-high when he stood upon the stool. Putting his hands upon it, he gave a little spring, and balanced on his arms a moment. Then he put one leg over the window-sill and looked back. No one was paying the slightest attention to him. Over all the noise he could hear the man tuning the viol. Swinging himself out slowly and silently, with his toes against the wall to steady him, he hung down as far as he could, gave a little push away from the house with his feet, caught a quick breath, and dropped.

CHAPTER XX

DISAPPOINTMENT

NICK landed upon a pile of soft earth. It broke away under his feet and threw him forward upon his hands and knees. He got up, a little shaken but unhurt, and stood close to the wall, looking all about quickly. A party of gaily dressed gallants were haggling with the horse-boys at the sheds; but they did not even look at him. A passing carter stared up at the window, measuring the distance with his eye, whistled incredulously, and trudged on.

Nick listened a moment, but heard only the clamor of voices inside, and the zoon, zoon, zoon of the viol. He was trembling all over, and his heart was beating like a trip-hammer. He wanted to run, but was fearful of exciting suspicion. Heading straight for the river, he walked as fast as he could through the gardens and the trees, brushing the dirt from his hose as he went.

There was a wherry just pushing out from Old Marigold stairs with a single passenger, a gardener with a basket of truck.

"Holloa!" cried Nick, hurrying down; "will ye take me across?"

"For thrippence," said the boatman, hauling the wherry alongside again with his hook.

Thrippence? Nick stopped, dismayed. Master Carew had his gold rose-noble, and he had not thought of the fare. They would soon find that he was gone.

"Oh, I must be across, sir!" he cried. "Can ye na take me free? I be little and not heavy; and I will help the gentleman with his basket."

The boatman's only reply was to drop his hook and push off with the oar.

But the gardener, touched by the boy's pitiful expression, to say nothing of being tickled by Nick's calling him gentleman, spoke up: "Here, jack-sculler," said he; "I 'll toss up wi' thee for it." He pulled a groat from his pocket and began spinning it in the air. "Come, thou lookest a gamesome fellow—cross he goes, pile he stays; best two in three flips—what sayst?"

"Done!" said the waterman. "Pop her up!"

Up went the groat.

Nick held his breath.

"Pile it is," said the gardener. "One for thee—and up she goes again!" The groat twirled in the air and came down *clink* upon the thwart.

"Aha!" cried the boatman, "'t is mine, or I 'm a horse!"

"Nay, jack-sculler," laughed the gardener; "cross it is! Ka me, ka thee, my pretty groat—I never lose with this groat."

"Oh, sir, do be brisk!" begged Nick, fearing every instant to see the master-player and the bandy-legged man come running down the bank.

"More haste, worse speed," said the gardener; "only evil weeds grow fast!" and he rubbed the groat on his jerkin. "Now, jack-sculler, hold thy breath; for up she goes again!"

A man came running over the rise. Nick gave a little frightened cry. It was only a huckster's knave with a roll of fresh butter. The groat came down with a splash in the bottom of the wherry. The boatman picked it up out of the water and wiped it with his sleeve. "Here, boy, get aboard," said he, shoving off; "and be lively about it!"

The huckster's knave came running down the landing. He pushed Nick aside, and scrambled into the wherry, puffing for breath. The boat fell off into the current. Nick, making a plunge for it into the water, just managed to catch the gunwale and get aboard, wet to the knees. But he did not care for that; for although there were people going up Paris Garden lane, and a crowd about the entrance of the Rose, he could not see Master Carew or the bandy-legged man anywhere. So he breathed a little freer, yet kept his eyes fast upon the play-house until the wherry bumped against Blackfriars stairs.

Picking up the basket of truck, he sprang ashore, and, dropping it upon the landing, took to his heels up the bank, without stopping to thank either gardener or boatman.

The gray walls of the old friary were just ahead, scarcely a stone's throw from the river. With heart beating high, he ran along the close, looking eagerly for the entrance. He came to a wicket-gate that was standing half ajar, and went through it into the old cloisters.

Everything there was still. He was glad of that, for the noise and the rush of the crowd outside confused him.

The place had once been a well-kept garden-plot, but now was become a mere stack of odds and ends of boards and beams, shavings, mortar, and broken brick. A long-legged fellow with a green patch over one eye was building a pair of stairs to a door beside which a sign read: "Playeres Here: None Elles."

Nick doffed his cap. "Good-day," said he; "is Master Will Shakspere in?"

The man put down his saw and sat back upon one of the trestles, staring stupidly. "Didst za-ay zummat?"

"I asked if Master Will Shakspere was in?"

The fellow scratched his head with a bit of shaving. "Noa; Muster Wull Zhacksper beant in."

Nick's heart stopped with a thump. "Where is he—do ye know?"

"A 's gone awa-ay," drawled the workman, vaguely.

"Away? Whither?"

"A 's gone to Ztratvoard to-own, whur 's woife do li-ive—went a-yesterday."

Nick sat blindly down upon the other trestle. He did not put his cap on again: he had quite forgotten it.

Master Will Shakspere gone to Stratford—and only the day before!

Too late—just one little day too late! It seemed like cruel mockery. Why, he might be almost home! The thought was more than he could bear: who could be brave in the face of such a blow? The bitter tears ran down his face again.

"Here, here, odzookens, lad!" grinned the workman, stolidly, "thou 'lt vetch t' river up if weeps zo ha-ard. Ztop un, ztop un; do now."

Nick sat staring at the ground. A beetle was trying to crawl over a shaving. It was a curly shaving, and as fast as the beetle crept up to the top the shaving rolled over, and dropped the beetle upon its back in the dust; but it only got up and tried again. Nick looked up. "Is—is Master Richard Burbage here, then?"

Perhaps Burbage, who had been a Stratford man, would help him.

"Noa," drawled the carpenter; "Muster Bubbage beant here; doan't want un, nuther—nuvver do moind a's owen business—always jawin' volks. A beant here, an' doan't want un, nuther."

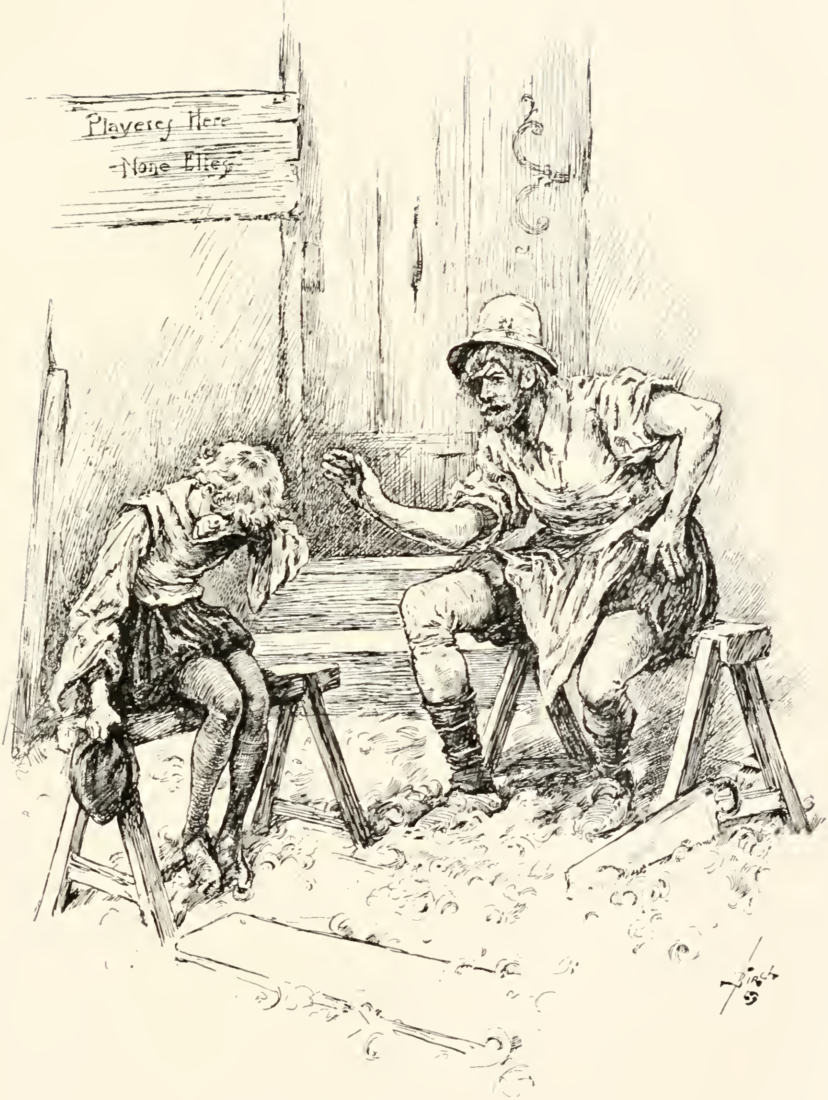
Nick's heart went down. "And where is he?"

"Who? Muster Bubbage? Whoy, a be-eth out to Zhoreditch, a-playin' at t' theater."

"And where may Shoreditch be?"

"Whur be Zhoreditch?" gaped the workman, vacantly. "Whoy—whoy, zummers over there a bit yon, zure"; and he waved his hand about in a way that pointed to nowhere at all.

"When will he be back?" asked Nick, desperately.


Playeres Here
None Elles
Birch

"'ZTOP UN, ZTOP UN, DO NOW!' SAID THE WORKMAN"

"Be ba-ack?" drawled the workman, slowly taking up his saw again; "back whur?—here? Whoy, a wun't pla-ay here no mo-ore avore next Martlemas."

Martinmas? That was almost mid-November. It was now but middle May.

Nick got up and went out at the wicket-gate. He was beginning to feel sick and a little faint. The rush in the street made him dizzy, and the sullen roar that came down on the wind from the town, mingled with the tramping of feet, the splash of oars, the bumping of boats along the wharves, and the shouts and cries of a thousand voices, stupefied him.

He was standing there motionless in the narrow way, as if dazed by a heavy fall, when Gaston Carew came running up from the river-front, with the bandy-legged man at his heels.

CHAPTER XXI

"THE CHILDREN OF PAUL'S"

AN old gray rat came out of its hole, ran swiftly across the floor, and, sitting up, crouched there, peering at Nick. He thought its bare, scaly tail was not a pleasant thing to see; yet he looked at it, with his elbows on his knees, and his chin in his hands.

He had been locked in for two days now. They had put in plenty of food, and he had eaten it all; for if he starved to death he would certainly never get home.

It was quite warm, and the boards had been taken from the window, so that there was plenty of light. The window faced the north, and in the night, wakened by some outcry in the street below, Nick had leaned his log-pillow against the wainscot, and, climbing up, looked out into the sky. It was clear, for a wonder, and the stars were very bright. The moon, like a smoky golden platter, rose behind the eastern towers of the town, and in the north hung the Great Wain pointing at the polar star.

Somewhere underneath those stars was Stratford. The throstles would be singing in the orchard there now, when the sun was low and the cool wind came up from the river with a little whispering in the lane. The purple-gray doves, too, would be cooing softly in the elms over the cottage gable. In fancy he heard the whistle of their wings as they flew. But all the sound that came in over the roofs of London town was a hollow murmur as from a kennel of surly hounds.

"Nick!—oh, Nick!"

Cicely Carew was calling at the door. The rat scurried off to its hole in the wall.

"What there, Nick! Art thou within?" Cicely called again; but Nick made no reply.

"Nick, *dear* Nick, art crying?"

"No," said he; "I 'm not."

There was a short silence.

"Nick, I say, wilt thou be good if I open the door?"

"No."

"Then I will open it anyway; thou durst n't be bad to me!"

The bolts thumped, and then the heavy door swung slowly back.

"Why, where art thou?"

He was sitting in the corner behind the door.

"Here," said he.

She came in, but he did not look up.

"Nick," she asked earnestly, "why wilt thou be so bad, and try to run away from my father?"

"I hate thy father!" said he, and brought his fist down upon his knee.

"Hate him? Oh, Nick! Why?"

"If thou be asking whys," said Nick, bitterly, "why did he steal me away from my mother?"

"Oh, surely, Nick, that cannot be true—no, no, it cannot be true. Thou hast forgotten, or thou hast slept too hard and had bad dreams. My father would not steal a pin. It was a nightmare. Doth thine head hurt thee?" She came over and stroked his forehead with her cool hand. She was a graceful child, and gentle in all her ways. "I am sorry thou dost not feel well, Nick. But my father will come presently, and he will heal thee soon. Don't cry any more."

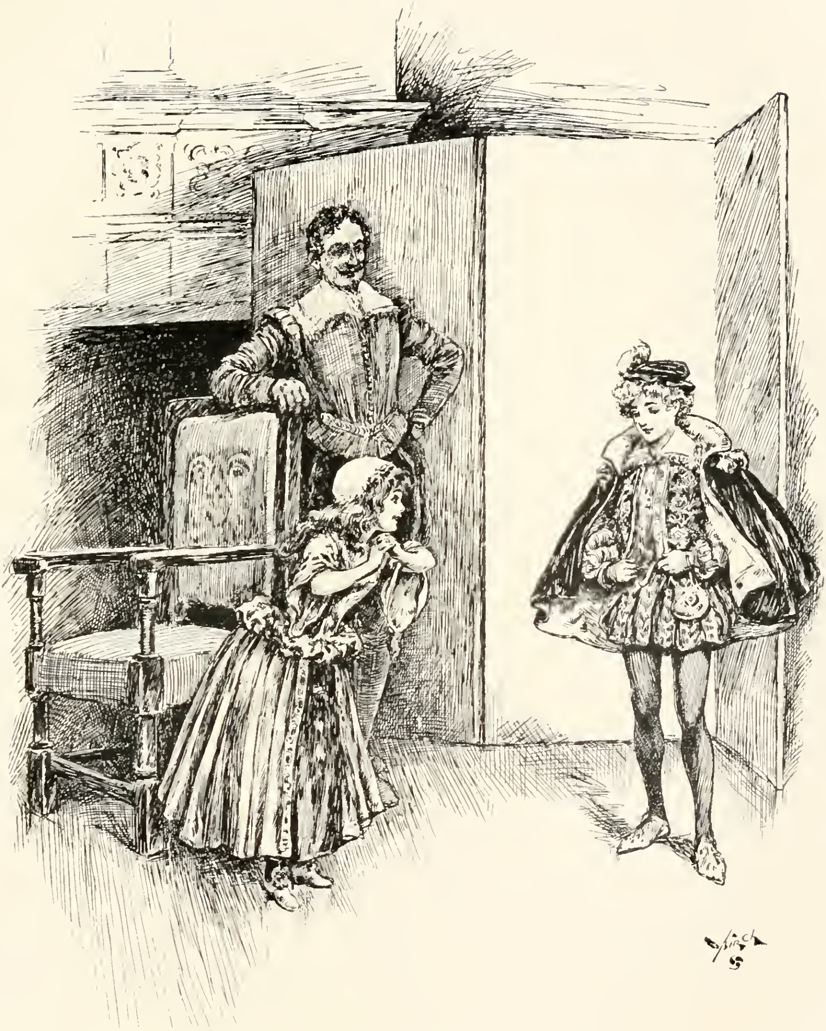
"I 'm not crying," said Nick, stoutly, though as he spoke a tear ran down his cheek, and fell upon his hand.

"Then it is the roof leaks," she said, looking up as if she had not seen his tear-blinded eyes. "But cheer up, Nick, and be a good boy—wilt thou not? 'T is dinner-time, and thy new clothes have come; and thou art to come down now and try them on."

When Nick came out of the tiring-room and found the master-player come, he knew not what to say or do. "Oh, brave, brave, brave!" cried Cicely, and danced around him, clapping her hands. "Why, it is a very prince—a king! Oh, Nick, thou art most beautiful to see!"

And Master Carew's own eyes sparkled; for truly it was a pleasant sight to see a fair young lad like Nick in such attire.

There was a fine white shirt of Holland linen, and long



"'OH, NICK, THOU ART MOST BEAUTIFUL TO SEE!' CRIED CICELY."

hose of grayish blue, with puffed and slashed trunks of velvet so blue as to be almost black. The sleeveless jerkin was of the same dark color, trellised with roses embroidered in silk, and loose from breast to broad lace collar so that the waistcoat of dull gold silk beneath it might show. A cloak of damask with a silver clasp, a buff-leather belt with a chubby purse hung to it by a chain, tan-colored slippers, and a jaunty velvet cap with a short white plume, completed the array. Everything, too, had been laid down with perfume, so that from head to foot he smelt as sweet and clean as a drift of rose-mallows.

"My soul!" cried Carew, stepping back and snapping his fingers with delight. "Thou art the bravest skylark that ever broke a shell! Fine feathers—fine bird—my soul, how ye do set each other off!" He took Nick by the shoulders, twirled him around, and, standing off again, stared at him like a man who has found two pound sterling in a cast-off coat.

"I can na pay for them, sir," said Nick, slowly.

"There 's nought to pay—it is a gift."

Nick hung his head, much troubled. What could he say; what could he think? This man had stolen him from home,—ay, made him tremble for his very life a dozen times,—and with his whole heart he knew he hated him—yet here, a gift!

"Yes, Nick, it is a gift—and all because I love thee, lad."

"Love me?"

"Why, surely! Who could see thee without liking, or hear thy voice and not love thee? Love thee, Nick?

Why, on my word and honour, lad, I love thee with all my heart."

"Thou hast chosen strange ways to show it, Master Carew," said Nick, and looked straight up into the master-player's eyes.

Carew turned upon his heel and ordered the dinner.

It was a good dinner: fat roast capon stuffed with spiced carrots; asparagus, biscuit, barley-cakes, and honey; and to end with, a flaky pie, and Spanish cordial sprinkled with burnt sugar. With such fare and a keen appetite, a marvelous brand-new suit of clothes, and Cicely chattering gaily by his side, Nick could not be sulky or doleful long. He was soon laughing; and Carew's spirits seemed to rise with the boy's.

"Here, here!" he cried, as Nick was served the third time to the pie; "art hollow to thy very toes? Why, thou 'lt eat us out of house and home—hey, Cicely? Marry come up, I think I 'd best take Ned Alleyn's five shillings for thine hire, after all! What! Five shillings? Set me in earth and bowl me to death with boiled turnips!—do they think to play bob-fool with me? Five shillings! A fico for their five shillings—and this for them!" and he squeezed the end of his thumb between his fingers. "Cicely, what dost think?—Phil Henslowe had the face to match Jem Bristow with our Nick!"

"Why, daddy, Jem hath a face like a halibut!"

"And a voice like a husky crow. Why, Nick's mere shadow on the stage is worth a ton of Jemmy Bristows. 'T was casting pearls before swine, Nick, to offer thee to

Henslowe and Alleyn; but we 've found a better trough than theirs—hey, Cicely Goldenheart, have n't we? Thou art to be one of Paul's boys."

"Paul who?"

Carew lay back in his chair and laughed. "Paul who? Why, Saint Paul, Nick,—'t is Paul's Cathedral boys I mean. Marry, what dost say to that?"

"I 'd like another barley-cake."

"You 'd *what?*" cried the master-player, letting the front legs of his chair come down on the floor with a thump.

"I 'd like another barley-cake," said Nick, quietly, helping himself to the honey.

"Upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour!" ejaculated Carew. "Tell a man his fortune 's made, and he calls for barley-cakes! Why, thou 'dst say 'Pooh!' to a cannon-ball! My faith, boy, dost understand what this doth mean?"

"Ay," said Nick; "that I be hungry."

"But, Nick, upon my soul, thou art to sing with the Children of Paul's; to play with the cathedral company; to be a bright particular star in the sweetest galaxy that ever shone in English sky! Dost take me yet?"

"Ay," said Nick, and sopped the honey with his cake.

Carew played with his glass uneasily, and tapped his heel upon the floor. "And is that all thou hast to say—hast turned oyster? There 's no R in May—nobody will eat thee! Come, don't make a mouth as though the honey of the world were all turned gall upon thy tongue.

'T is the flood-tide of thy fortune, boy! Thou art to sing before the school to-morrow, so that Master Nathaniel Gyles may take thy range and worth. Now, truly, thou wilt do thy very best?"

The bandy-legged man had brought water in a ewer, and poured some in a basin for Nick to wash his hands. There was a green ribbon in his ear, and the towel hung across his arm. Nick wiped his hands in silence.

"Come," said Master Carew, with an ugly sharpness in his voice, "thou 'lt sing thy very best?"

"There 's nothing else to do," replied Nick, doggedly.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SKYLARK'S SONG

MASTER NATHANIEL GYLES, Precentor of St. Paul's, had pipe-stem legs, and a face like an old parchment put in a box to keep. His sandy hair was thin and straggling, and his fine cloth hose wrinkled around his shrunken shanks; but his eye was sharp, and he wore about his neck a broad gold chain that marked him as no common man.

For Master Nathaniel Gyles was head of the Cathedral schools of acting and of music, and he stood upon his dignity.

"My duty is laid down," said he, "in most specific terms, sir,—*lex cathedralis*,—that is to say, by the laws of the cathedral; and has been, sir, since the reign of Richard the Third. *Primus Magister Scholarum, Custos Morum, Quartus Custos Rotulorum*,—so the title stands, sir; and I know my place."

He pushed Nick into the anteroom, and turned to Carew with an irritated air.

"I likewise know, sir, what is what. In plain words, Master Gaston Carew, ye have grossly misrepresented this boy to me, to the waste of much good time. Why, sir, he does not dance a step, and cannot act at all."

"Soft, Master Gyles—be not so fast!" said Carew, haughtily, drawing himself up, with his hand on his poniard; "dost mean to tell me that I have lied to thee? Marry, sir, thy tongue will run thee into a blind alley! I told thee that the boy could sing, but not that he could act or dance."

"Pouf, sir,—words! I know my place: one peg below the dean, sir, nothing less: '*Magister, et cetera*'—'t is so set down. And I tell thee, sir, he has no training, not a bit; can't tell a pricksong from a bottle of hay; does n't know a canon from a crocodile, or a fugue from a hole in the ground!"

"Oh, fol-de-riddle de fol-de-rol! What has that to do with it? I tell thee, sir, the boy can sing."

"And, sir, I say I know my place. Music does not grow like weeds."

"And fa-la-las don't make a voice."

"What! How? Wilt thou teach me?" The master's voice rose angrily. "Teach me, who learned descant and counterpoint in the Gallo-Belgic schools, sir; the best in all the world! Thou, who knowest not a staccato from a stick of liquorice!"

Carew shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Come, Master Gyles, this is fool play. I told thee that the boy could sing, and thou hast not yet heard him try. Thou knowest right well I am no such simple gull as to mistake a jay for a nightingale; and I tell thee, sir, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour, he has the voice that thou dost need if thou wouldst win the favor of the Queen. He has the voice, and thou the thingumbobs to make the most of it. Don't be a fool, now; hear him sing. That 's all I ask. Just hear him once. Thou 'lt pawn thine ears to hear him twice."

The music-school stood within the old cathedral grounds. Through the windows came up distantly the murmur of the throng in Paul's Yard. It was mid-afternoon, quite warm; blundering flies buzzed up and down the lozenged panes, and through the dark hall crept the humming sound of childish voices reciting eagerly, with now and then a sharp, small cry as some one faltered in his lines and had his fingers rapped. Somewhere else there were boyish voices running scales, now up, now down, without a stop, and other voices singing harmonies, two parts and three together, here and there a little flat from weariness.

The stairs were very dark, Nick thought, as they went up to another floor; but the long hall they came into there was quite bright with the sun.

At one end was a little stage, like the one at the Rose play-house, with a small gallery for musicians above it; but everything here was painted white and gold, and was most scrupulously clean. The rush-strewn floor was filled with oaken benches, and there were paintings hanging upon the wall, portraits of old head-masters and precentors. Some of them were so dark with time that Nick wondered if they had been blackamoors.

Master Gyles closed the great door and pulled a cord that hung by the stage. A bell jangled faintly somewhere in the wall. Nick heard the muffled voices hush, and then a shuffling tramp of slippered feet came up the outer stair.

"Pouf!" said the precentor, crustily. "*Tempus fugit*—that is to say, we have no time to waste. So, marry, boy, *venite, exultemus*—in other words, if thou canst sing, be up and at it. Come, *cantate*—sing, I bid thee, and that instanter—if thou canst sing at all."

The under-masters and monitors were pushing the boys into their seats. Carew pointed to the stage. "Thou 'lt do thy level best!" he said in a low, hard tone, and something clashed beneath his cloak like steel on steel.

Nick went up the steps behind the screen. It seemed cold in the room; he had not noticed it before. Yet there were sweat-drops upon his forehead. He felt as if he were a jackanapes he had seen once at the Stratford fair, which wore a crimson jerkin and a cap. The man who had the jackanapes played upon a pipe and a tabor; and when he said, "Dance!" the jackanapes danced, for it was sorely afraid of the man. Yet when Nick looked around and did not see the master-player anywhere in the hall, he felt exceedingly lonely all at once without him, though he both feared and hated him.

There still was a shuffling of feet and a low talking; but soon it became very quiet, and they all seemed to be waiting for him to begin. He did not care, but supposed he might as well: what else could he do?

There was a clock somewhere ticking quickly with its sharp, metallic ring. As he listened, lonely, his heart cried out for home. In his fancy the wind seemed rippling over the Avon, and the elm-leaves rustled like rain upon the roof above his bed. There were red and white wild-roses in the hedge, and in the air a smell of clover and of new-mown hay. The mowers would be working in the clover in the moonlight. He could almost see the sweep of the shining scythes, and hear the chink-a-chank, chink-a-chank of the whetstone on the long, curving blades. Chink-a-chank, chink-a-chank—'t was but the clock, and he in London town.

Carew, sitting there behind the carven prompter's-screen, put down his head between his hands and listened. There were murmurings a little while, then silence. Would the boy never begin? He pressed his knuckles into his temples and waited. Bow Bells rang out the hour; but the room was as still as a deep sleep. Would the boy never begin?

The precentor sniffed. It was a contemptuous, incredulous sniff. Carew looked up—his lips white, a fierce red spot in each cheek. He was talking to himself. "By the whistle of the Lord High Admiral!" he said—but there he stopped and held his breath. Nick was singing.

Only the old madrigal, with its half-forgotten words that other generations sang before they fell asleep. How queer it sounded there! It was a very simple tune, too; yet, as he sang, the old precentor started from his chair and pressed his wrinkled hands together against his breast. He quite forgot the sneer upon his face, and it went fading out like breath from a frosty pane.

He had twelve boys who could sing a hundred songs at sight from unfamiliar notes; who kept the beat and marked the time as if their throats were pendulums; could syncopate and floriate as readily as breathe. And this was only a common country song.

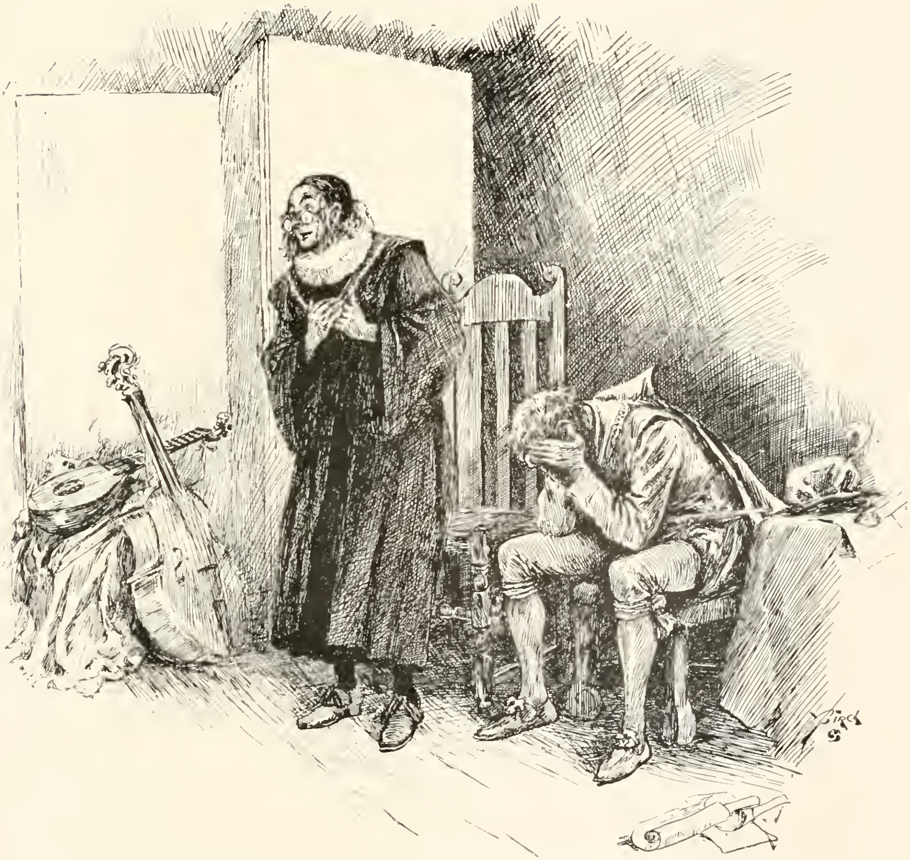
But—"That voice, that voice!" he panted to himself: for old Nat Gyles was music-mad; melody to him was like the very breath of life. And the boy's high, young voice, soft as a flute and silver clear, throbbed in the air as if his very heart were singing out of his body in the sound. And then, like the skylark rising, up, up it went, and up, up, up, till the older choristers held their breath and feared that the vibrant tone would break, so slender, film-like was the trembling thread of the boy's wild skylark song. But no; it trembled there, high, sweet, and clear, a moment in the air; and then came running, rippling, floating down, as though some one had set a song on fire in the sky, and dropped it quivering and bright into a shadow world. Then suddenly it was gone, and the long hall was still.

The old precentor stepped beyond the screen.

Gaston Carew's face was in his hands, and his shoulders shook convulsively. "I 'll leave thee go, lad,—*ma foi*, I 'll leave thee go. But, nay, I dare not leave thee go!"

Some one came and tapped him on the shoulder. It was the sub-precentor. "Master Gyles would speak with thee, sir," said he, in a low tone, as if half afraid of the sound of his own voice in the quiet that was in the hall.

Carew drew his hand hastily over his face, as if to take the old one off and put a new one on, then arose and followed the man.



"'THAT VOICE, THAT VOICE!' NAT GYLES PANTED TO HIMSELF."

The old precentor stood with his hands still clasped against his breast. "*Mirabile!*" he was saying with bated breath. "It is impossible, and I have dreamed! Yet *credo*—I believe—*quia impossibile est*—because it is impossible. Tell me, Carew, do I wake or dream—or, stay, was it a soul I heard? Ay, Carew, 't was a soul: the lad's own white, young soul. My faith, I said he was of no account! *Satis verborum*—say no more. *Humanum est errare*—I am a poor old fool; and there 's a sour bug flown in mine eye that makes it water so!" He wiped his eyes, for the tears were running down his cheeks.

"Thou 'lt take him, then?" asked Carew.

"Take him?" cried the old precentor, catching the master-player by the hand. "Marry, that will I; a voice like that grows not on every bush. Take him? Pouf! I know my place—he shall be entered on the rolls at once."

"Good!" said Carew. "I shall have him learn to dance, and teach him how to act myself. He stays with me, ye understand; thy school fare is miserly. I 'll dress him, too; for these students' robes are shabby stuff. But for the rest—"

"Trust me," said Master Gyles; "he shall be the first singer of them all. He shall be taught—but who can teach the lark its song, and not do horrid murder on it? Faith, Carew, I 'll teach the lad myself; ay, all I know. I studied in the best schools in the world."

"And, hark 'e, Master Gyles," said Carew, sternly all at once; "thou 'lt come no royal placard and seizure on me

—ye have sworn. The boy is mine to have and to hold, with all that he earns, in spite of thy prerogatives."

For the kings of old had given the masters of this school the right to take for St. Paul's choir whatever voices pleased them, wherever they might be found, by force if not by favor, barring only the royal singers at Windsor; and when men have such privileges it is best to be wary how one puts temptation in their way.

"Thou hadst mine oath before I even saw the boy," said the precentor, haughtily. "Dost think me perjured —*Primus Magister Scholarum, Custos Morum, Quartus Custos Rotulorum?* Pouf! I know my place. My oath 's my oath. But, soft; enough—here comes the boy. Who could have told a skylark in such popinjay attire?"

CHAPTER XXIII

A NEW LIFE

AND now a strange, new life began for Nicholas Attwood, in some things so grand and kind that he almost hated to dislike it.

It was different in every way from the simple, pinching round in Stratford, and full of all the comforts of richness and plenty that make life happy—excepting home and mother.

Master Gaston Carew would have nothing but the best, and what he wanted, whether he needed it or not; so with him money came like a summer rain, and went like water out of a sieve: for he was a wild blade.

They ate their breakfast when they pleased; dined at eleven, like the nobility; supped at five, as was the fashion of the court. They had wheat-bread the whole week round, as only rich folk could afford, with fruit and berries in their season, and honey from the Surrey bee-farms that made one's mouth water with the sight of it dripping from the flaky comb; and on Fridays spitchcocked eels, pickled herrings, and plums, with simnel-cakes, poached eggs and milk, cream cheese and cordial, like very kings; so that Nick could not help thriving.

The master-player very seldom left him by himself to mope or to be melancholy; but, while ever vaguely promising to let him go, did everything in his power to make him rather wish to stay; so that Nick was constantly surprised by the free-handed kindness of this man whom he had every other reason in the world, he thought, for deeming his worst enemy.

When there were any new curiosities in Fleet street,—wild men with rings in their noses, wondrous fishes, puppet-shows, or red-capped baboons whirling on a pole,—Carew would have Nick see them as well as Cicely; and often took them both to Bartholomew's Fair, where there was a giant eating raw beef and a man dancing upon a rope high over the heads of the people. He would have had Nick every Thursday to the bear-baiting in the Paris Garden circus beside; but one sight of that brutal sport made the boy so sick that they never went again, but to the stage-plays at the Rose instead, which Nick enjoyed immensely, for Carew himself acted most excellently, and Master Tom Heywood always came and spoke kindly to the lonely boy.

For, in spite of all, Nick's heart ached so at times that he thought it would surely break with longing for his mother. And at night, when all the house was still and dark, and he alone in bed, all the little, unconsidered things of home—the beehives and the fragrant mint beside the kitchen door, the smell of the baking bread or frying carrots, the sound of the red-cheeked harvest apples dropping in the orchard, and the plump of the old bucket in the well—came back to him so vividly that many a time he cried himself to sleep, and could not have forgotten if he would.

On Midsummer Day there was a Triumph on the river at Westminster, with a sham-fight and a great shooting of guns and hurling of balls of wild-fire. The Queen was there, and the ambassadors of France and Venice, with the Duke of Lennox and the Earls of Arundel and Southampton. Master Carew took a wherry to Whitehall, and from the green there they watched the show.

The Thames was fairly hidden by the boats, and there was a grand state bark all trimmed with silk and velvet for the Queen to be in to see the pastime. But as for that, all Nick could make out was the high carved stern of the bark, painted with England's golden lions, and the bark was so far away that he could not even tell which was the Queen.

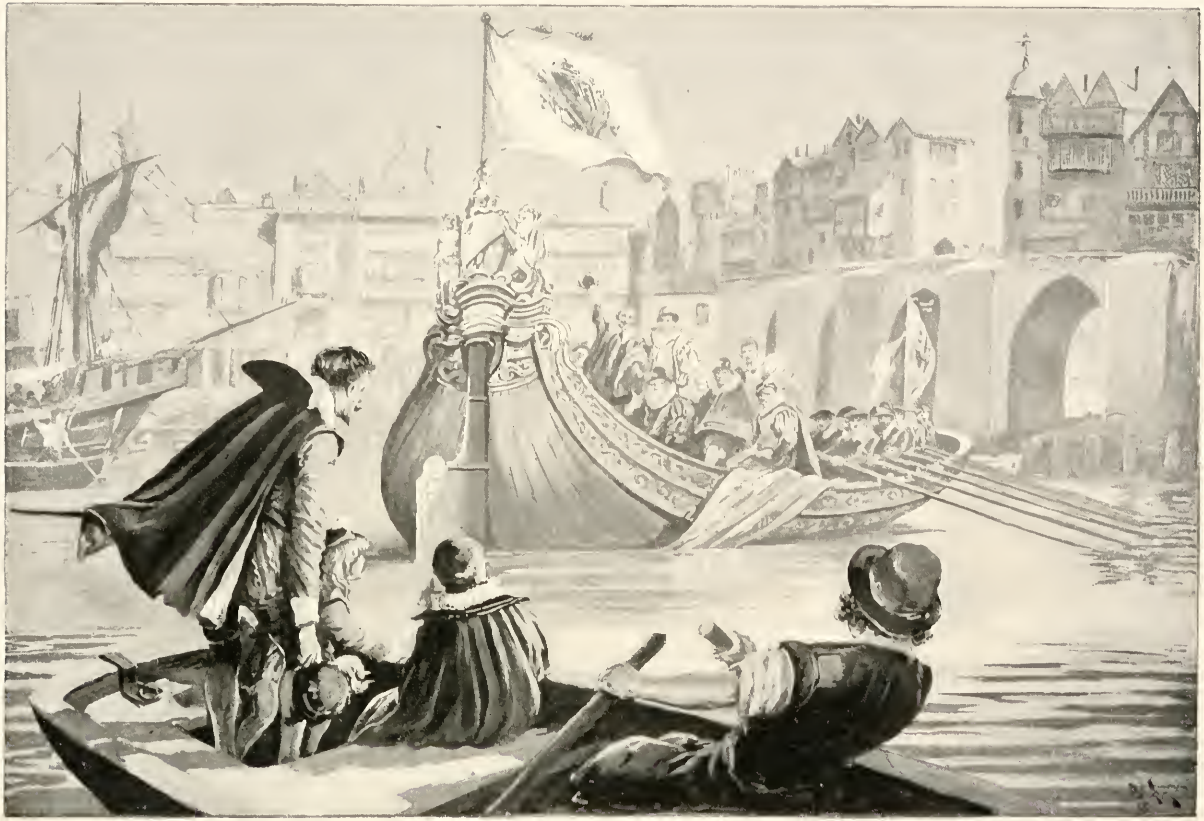
Coming home by Somerset House, a large barge passed them with many watermen rowing, and fine carpets about the seats; and in it the old Lord Chamberlain and his son my Lord Hunsdon, who, it was said, was to be the Lord Chamberlain when his father died; for the old lord was failing, and the Queen liked handsome young men about her.

In the barge, beside their followers, were a company of richly dressed gentlemen, who were having a very gay time together, and seemed to please the old Lord Chamberlain exceedingly with the things they said. They were somebodies, as Nick could very well see from their carriage and address; and, so far as the barge allowed, they were all clustered about one fellow in the seat by my Lord Hunsdon. He seemed to be the chiefest spokesman of them all, and every one appeared very glad indeed to be friendly with him. My Lord Hunsdon himself made free with his own nobility, and sat beside him arm in arm.

What he was saying they were too far away to hear in the shouting and splash; but those with him in the barge were listening as eagerly as children to a merry tale. Sometimes they laughed until they held their sides; and then again as suddenly they were very quiet, and played softly with their tankards and did not look at one another as he went gravely on telling his story. Then all at once he would wave his hand gaily, and his smile would sparkle out; and the whole company, from the old Lord Chamberlain down, would brighten up again, as if a new dawn had come over the hills into their hearts from the light of his hazel eyes.

Nick made no doubt that this was some young earl rolling in wealth; for who else could have such listeners? Yet there was, nevertheless, something so familiar in his look that he could not help staring at him as the barge came thumping through the jam.

They passed along an oar's-length or two away; and as they came abeam, Carew, rising, doffed his hat, and bowed politely to them all.



"AS THEY CAME ABEAM, CAREW, RISING, DOFFED HIS HAT, AND BOWED POLITELY TO THEM ALL."

In spite of his wild life, he was a striking, handsome man.

The old Lord Chamberlain said something to his son, and pointed with his hand. All the company in the barge turned round to look; and he who had been talking stood up quickly with his hand upon the young lord's arm, and, smiling, waved his cap.

Nick gave a sharp cry.

Then the barge pushed through, and shot away down stream like a wild swan.

"Why, Nick," exclaimed Cicely, "how dreadful thou dost look!" and, frightened, she caught him by the hand. "Why, oh!—what is it, Nick—thou art not ill?"

"It was Will Shakspere!" cried Nick, and sank into the bottom of the wherry with his head upon the master-player's knee. "Oh, Master Carew," he cried, "will ye never leave me go?"

Carew laid his hand upon the boy's head, and patted it gently.

"Why, Nick," said he, and cleared his throat, "is not this better than Stratford?"

"Oh, Master Carew—mother 's there!" was the reply.

There was no sound but the thud of oars in the rowlocks and the hollow bubble of the water at the stern, for they had fallen out of the hurry and were coming down alone.

"Is thy mother a good woman, Nick?" asked Cicely.

Carew was staring out into the fading sky. "Ay, sweetheart," he answered in a queer, husky voice, suddenly putting one arm about her and the other around Nick's shoulders. “None but a good mother could have so good a son.”

“Then thou wilt send him home, daddy?” asked Cicely.

Carew took her hand in his, but answered nothing.

They had come to the landing.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAKING OF A PLAYER

MASTER WILL SHAKSPERE was in town!

The thought ran through Nick Attwood's head like a half-remembered tune. Once or twice he had all but sung it instead of the words of his part. Master Will Shakspere was in town!

Could he but just find Master Shakspere, all his trouble would be over; for the husband of his mother's own cousin would see justice done him in spite of the master-player and the bandy-legged man with the ribbon in his ear—of that he was sure.

But there seemed small chance of its coming about; for the doors of Gaston Carew's house were locked and barred by day and by night, as much to keep Nick in as to keep thieves out; and all day long, when Carew was away, the servants went about the lower halls, and Gregory Goole's uncanny face peered after him from every shadowy corner; and when he went with Carew anywhere, the master-player watched him like a hawk, while always at his heels he could hear the clump, clump, clump of the bandy-legged man following after him.

Even were he free to go as he pleased, he knew not where to turn; for the Lord Chamberlain's company would not be at the Blackfriars play-house until Martinmas; and before that time to look for even Master Will Shakspere at random in London town would be worse than hunting for a needle in a haystack.

To be sure, he knew that the Lord Chamberlain's men were still playing at the theater in Shoreditch; for Master Carew had taken Cicely there to see the "Two Gentlemen of Verona." But just where Shoreditch was, Nick had only the faintest idea—somewhere away off by Finsbury Fields, beyond the city walls to the north of London town—and all the wide world seemed north of London town; and the way thither lay through a bewildering tangle of streets in which the din and the rush of the crowd were never still.

From a hopeless chase like that Nick shrank back like a snail into its shell. He was not too young to know that there were worse things than to be locked in Gaston Carew's house. It were better to be a safe-kept prisoner there than to be lost in the sinks of London. And so, knowing this, he made the best of it.

But Master Shakspere was come back to town, and that was something. It seemed somehow less lonely just to think of it.

Yet in truth he had but little time to think of it; for the master-player kept him closely at his strange, new work, and taught him daily with the most amazing patience.

He had Nick learn no end of stage parts off by heart, with their cues and "business," entrances and exits; and worked fully as hard as his pupil, reading over every sentence twenty times until Nick had the accent perfectly. He would have him stamp, too, and turn about, and gesture in accordance with the speech, until the boy's arms ached, going with him through the motions one by one, over and over again, unsatisfied, but patient to the last, until Nick wondered. "Nick, my lad," he would often say, with a tired but determined smile, "one little thing done wrong may spoil the finest play, as one bad apple rots the barrelful. We 'll have it right, or not at all, if it takes a month of Sundays."

So, often, he kept Nick before a mirror for an hour at a time, making faces while he spoke his lines, smiling, frowning, or grimacing as best seemed to fit the part, until the boy grew fairly weary of his own looks. Then sometimes, more often as the time slipped by, Carew would clap his hands with a boyish laugh, and have a pie brought and a cup of Spanish cordial for them both, declaring that he loved the lad with all his heart, upon the remnant of his honour: from which Nick knew that he was coming on.

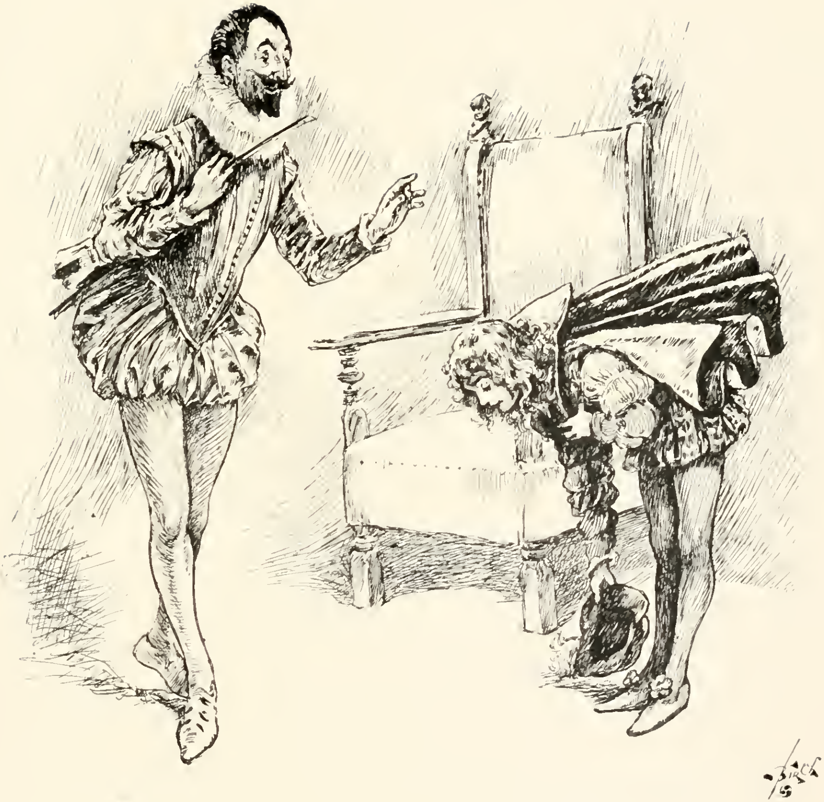
Cicely Carew's governess was a Mistress Agnes Anstey. By birth she had been a Harcourt of Ankerwyke, and she was therefore everywhere esteemed fit by birth and breeding to teach the young mind when to bow and when to beckon. She came each morning to the house, and Carew paid her double shillings to see to it that Nick learned such little tricks of cap and cloak as a lady's page need have, the carriage best fitted for his place, and how to come into a room where great folks were. Moreover, how to back out again, bowing, and not fall over the stools—which was no little art, until Nick caught the knack of peeping slyly between his legs when he bowed.

His hair, too, was allowed to grow long, and was combed carefully every day by the tiring-woman; and soon, as it was naturally curly, it fell in rolling waves about his neck.

On the heels of the governess came M'sieu de Fleury, who, it was said, had been dancing-master to Hatton, the late Lord Chancellor of England, and had taught him those tricks with his nimble heels which had capered him into the Queen's good graces, and so got him the chancellorship. M'sieu spoke dreadful English, but danced like the essence of agility, and taught both Nick and Cicely the latest Italian coranto, playing the tune upon his queer little pochette.

Cicely already danced like a pixy, and laughed merrily at her comrade's first awkward antics, until he flushed with embarrassment. At that she instantly became grave, and, when M'sieu had gone, came across the room, and putting her arm about Nick, said repentantly, "Don't thou mind me, Nick. Father saith the French all laugh too soon at nothing; and I have caught it from my mother's blood. A boy is not good friends with his feet as a girl is; but thou wilt do beautifully, I know; and M'sieu shall teach us the galliard together."

And often, after the lesson was over and M'sieu de-



M'SIEU DE FLEURY TEACHES NICK TO DANCE AND TO BOW.

parted, she would have Nick try his steps over and over again in the great room, while she stood upon the stool to make her tall, and cried, "Sa—sa!" as the master did, scolding and praising him by turns, or jumping down in pretty impatience to tuck up her little silken skirts and show him the step herself; while the cook's knave and the scullery-maids peeped at the door and cried: "La, now, look 'e, Moll!" at every coupee.

It made a picture quaint and pretty to see them dancing there. The smoky light, stealing in through the narrow casements over the woodwork dark with age, dropped in little yellow chequers upon old chests of oak, of walnut, and of strange, purple-black wood from foreign lands, giving a weird life to the griffins and twisted traceries carved upon their sides. High-backed, narrow chairs stood along the wall, with cushioned stools inlaid with shell. Twinklings of light glinted from the brass candlesticks. On the wall above the wainscot the faded hangings wavered in the draught, crusted thickly with strange embroidered flowers. And dancing there together in the semi-gloom, the children seemed quaint little figures stepped down from the tapestry at the touch of a magic wand.

And so the time went slipping by, very pleasantly upon the whole, and Nick's young heart grew stout again within his breast; for he was strong and well, and in those days the very air was full of hope, and no man knew what might betide with the rising of to-morrow's sun.

Every day, from two till three o'clock, he was at Master

Gyles's private singing-room at the old cathedral school, learning to read music at first sight, and to sing offhand the second, third, and fourth parts of queer intermingled fugues or wonderfully constructed canons.

At first his head felt stuffed like a feasted glutton with all the learning that the old precentor poured into it; but by and by he found it plain enough, and no very difficult thing to follow up the prickings in the paper with his voice, and to sing parts written at fifths and fourths and thirds with other voices as easily as to carry a song alone. But still he sang best his own unpointed songs, the call and challenge of the throstle and the merle, the morning glory of the lark, songs that were impossible to write. And those were the songs that the precentor was at the greatest pains to have him sing in perfect tones, making him open his mouth like a little round O and let the music float out of itself.

Like the master-player, nothing short of perfection pleased old Nathaniel Gyles, and Nick's voice often wavered with sheer weariness as he ran his endless scales and sang absurd fa-la-la-las while his teacher beat the time in the air with his lean forefinger like a grim automaton.

The old man, too, was chary of his praise, though Nick tried hard to please him, and it was only by little things he told his satisfaction. He touzed the ears of the other boys, and sometimes smartly thumped their crowns; but with Nick he only nipped his ruddy cheek between his thumb and finger, or laid his hand upon his shoulder when the hard day's work was done, saying, "*Satis cantorum*—it

"IT MADE A PICTURE QUAINT AND PRETTY TO SEE THEM DANCING THERE."

is enough. Now be off to thy nest, sir; and do not forget to wash thy throat with good cold water every day."

All this time the busy sand kept running in the glass. July was gone, and August at its heels. The hot breath of the summer had cooled, and the sun no longer burned the face when it came in through the windows. Nick often shut his eyes and let the warm light fall upon his closed lids. It made a ruddy glow like the wild red poppies that grow in the pale green rye. In fancy he could almost smell the queer, rancid odor of the crimson bloom crushed beneath the feet of the farmers' boys who cut the butter-yellow mustard from among the bearded grain.

"Heigh-ho and alackaday!" thought Nick. "It is better in the country than in town!" For there was no smell in all the town like the clean, sweet smell of the open fields just after a summer rain, no colors like the bright heart's-ease and none-so-pretty, or the honeysuckle over the cottage door, and no song ever to be heard among the sooty chimney-pots like the song of the throstle piping to the daisies on the hill.

But he had little time to dream such dreams, for every day from four to six o'clock the children's company played and sang in public, at their own school-hall, or in the courtyard of the Mitre Inn on Bread street near St. Paul's.

They were the pets of London town, and their playing-place was thronged day after day. For the bright young faces and sweet, unbroken voices of the richly costumed lads made a spot in sordid London life like a pot of posies in a window on a dark street; so that both the high and the low, the rich and the poor, came in to see them play and dance, to hear them sing, and to laugh again at the witty things which were written for them to say.

The songs that were set for Nick to sing were always short, sweet, simple things that even the dull-eyed, toil-worn folk upon the rough plank benches in the pit could understand. Many a silver shilling came clinking down at the heels of the other boys from the galleries of the inn, where the people of the better classes, wealthy merchants, ladies and their dashing gallants, watched the children's company; but when Nick's songs were done the common people down below seemed all gone daft. They tossed red apples after him, ripe yellow pears, fat purple plums by handfuls, called him by name and brought him back, and cried for more and more and more, until the old precentor shook his head behind the prompter's-screen, and waved Nick off with a forbidding frown. Yet all the while he chuckled to himself until it seemed as if his dry old ribs would rattle in his sides; and every day, before Nick sang, he had him up to his little room for a broken egg and a cup of rosy cordial.

"To clear thy voice and to cheer the cockles of thine heart," said he; "and to tune that pretty throat of thine *ad gustum Reginae*—which is to say, 'to the Queen's own taste,'—God bless Her Majesty!"

The other boys were cast for women's parts, for women never acted then; and a queer sight it was to Nick to see his fellows in great farthingales of taffeta and starchy cambric that rustled as they walked, with popinjay blue ribbon in their hair, and flowered stomachers sparkling with paste jewels.

And, truth, it was no easy thing to tell them from the real affair, or to guess the made from the maiden, so slender and so graceful were they all, with their ruffs and their muffs and their feathered fans, and all the airs and mincing graces of the daintiest young miss.

But old Nat Gyles would never have Nick Attwood play the girl. "The lad is good enough for me just as he is," said he; and that was all there was of it.

CHAPTER XXV

THE WANING OF THE YEAR

IN September the Lord Admiral's company made a tour of the Midlands during the great English fairing-time; but Carew did not go with them. For, though still by name master-player with Henslowe and Alleyn, his business with them had come to be but little more than pocketing his share of the profits; and for the rest, nothing but to take Nick daily to and from St. Paul's, and to draw his wages week by week.

Of those wages Nick saw never a penny: Carew took good care of that. Yet he gave him everything that any boy could need, and bought him whatever he fancied the instant he so much as expressed a wish for it: which, in truth, was not much; for Nick had lived in only a country town, and knew not many things to want.

But with money a-plenty thus coming so easily into his hands,—money for dicing, for luxuries, for all his wild sports, money for Cicely, money for keeps, money to play chuckie-stones with if he chose,—there was no bridle to Gaston Carew's wild career. His boon companions were spendthrifts and gamesters, dissolute fellows, of whom the least said soonest mended; and with them he was brawling early and late, very often all night long. And though money came in fast, he wasted it faster, so that matters went from bad to worse. Duns came spying about his door, and bailiffs hunted after him around the town with unpaid tradesmen's bills. Yet still he laughed and clapped his hand upon his poniard in the old bold way.

September faded away in wistful haze along the Hampstead hills. The Admiral's men came riding back with keen October ringing at their heels, and all the stalls were full of red-cheeked apples striped with emerald and gold. November followed, with its nipping frost, and all St. George's merry green fields turned brown and purple-gray. The old year was waning fast.

The Queen's Day was but a poor holiday, in spite of the shut-up shops; for it was grown so cold with sleet and rain that it was hard to get about, the gutters and streets being very foul, and the by-lanes impassable. And now the children of Paul's gave no more plays in the yard of the Mitre Inn, but sang in their own warm hall; for winter was at hand.

There came black nights when an ugly wind moaned in the shivering chimneys and howled across the peaked roofs, nights when there was no playing at the Rose, but it was hearty to be by the fire. Then sometimes Carew sat at home all evening long, with Cicely upon his knee, and told strange tales of lands across the sea, where he had traveled when he was young, and where none spoke

English but chance travelers, and even the loudest shouting could not serve to make the people understand.

While he spun these wondrous yarns Nick would curl up on the hearth and blow the crackling fire, sometimes staring at the master-player's stories, sometimes laughing to himself at the funny faces carved upon the sides of the chubby Dutch bellows, and sometimes neither laughing nor listening, but thinking silently of home. Then Carew, looking at him there, would quickly turn his face away and tell another tale.

But oftener the master-player stayed all night at the Falcon Inn with Dick Jones, Tom Hearne, Humphrey Jeffs, and other reckless roysterers, dicing and flipping shillings at shovel-board until his finger-nails were sore. Then Nick would read aloud to Cicely out of the "Hundred Merry Tales," or pop old riddles at her puzzled head until she, laughing, cried, "Enough!" But most of all he liked the story of brave Guy of Warwick, and would tell it again and again, with other legends of Arden Wood, till bedtime came.

In the gray of the morning Carew would come home, unshaven and leaden-eyed, with his bandy-legged varlet trotting like a watch-dog at his heels; and then, if the gaming had gone well, he was a lord, an earl, a duke, at least, so merry and so sprightly would he be withal; but if the dice had fallen wrong, he would by turns be raving mad or sodden as a sunken pie.

Yet, be his temper what it might, he was but one thing always to Cicely, and doffed ill humor like a shabby hat when she came running to meet him in the shadows of the hall; so that when he came into the lighted room, with her upon his shoulder, his face was smiles, his step a frolic, and his bearing that of a happy boy.

But day by day the weather grew worse, with snow and ice paving the streets with a glassy glare and choking the frozen drains; and there was trouble and want among the poor in the wretched alleys near Carew's house: for fuel was high and food scarce, and there were many deaths, so that the knell was tolling constantly.

Cicely cried until her eyes were red for the very sadness of it all, since she might do nothing for them, and hated the sound of the sullen bell.

"Pshaw, Cicely!" said Nick; "why should ye cry? Ye do na know them; so ye need na care."

"But, Nick," said she, "*nobody* seems to care! And, sure, *somebody* ought to care; for it may be some one's mother that is dead."

At that Nick felt a very queer choking in his own throat, and did not rest quite easy in his mind until he had given the silver buckle from his cloak to a boy who stood crying with cold and hunger in the street, and begged a farthing of him for the love of the good God.

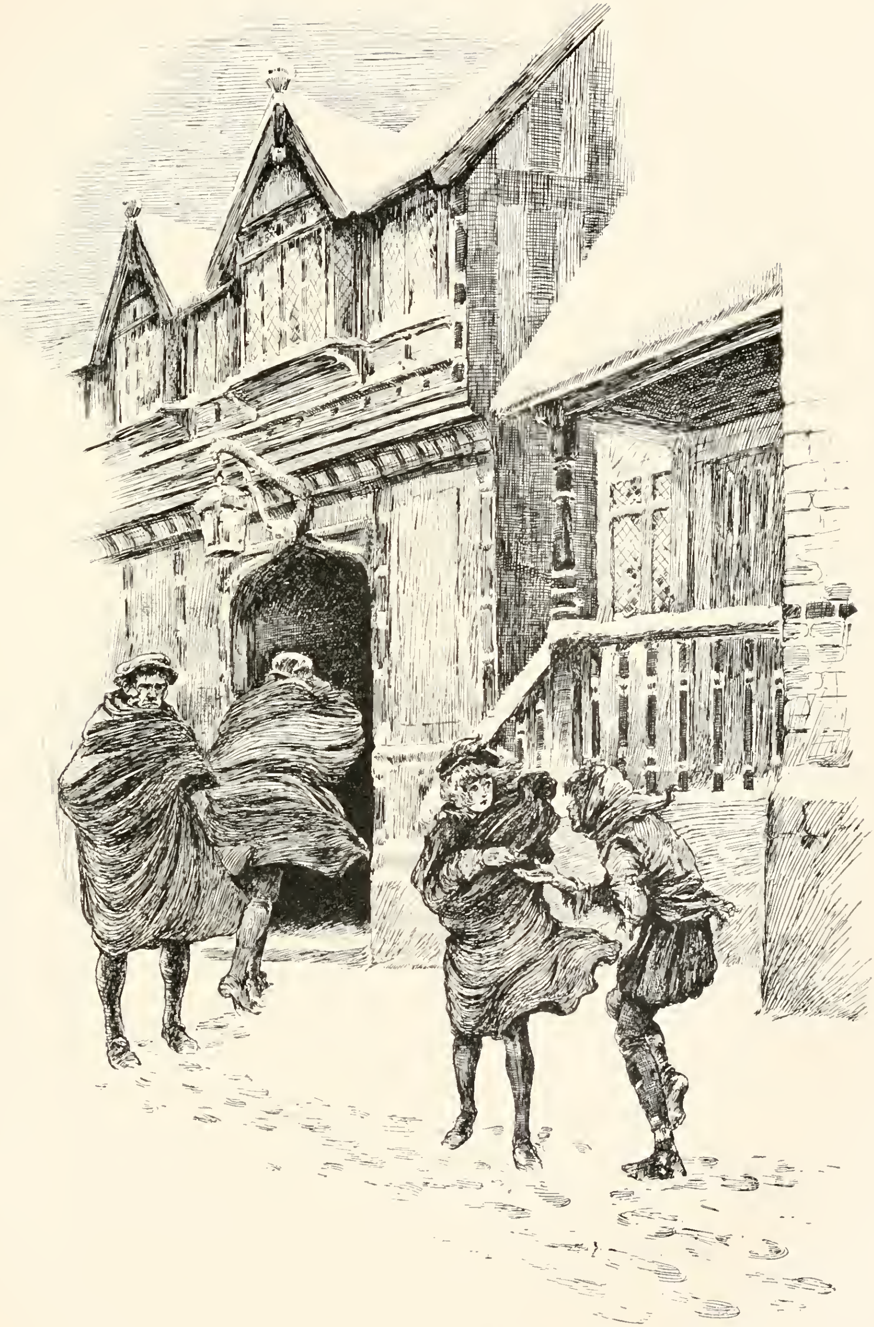
Then came a thaw, with mist and fog so thick that people were lost in their own streets, and knocked at their next-door neighbor's gate to ask the way home. All day long, down by the Thames drums beat upon the wharves and bells ding-donged to guide the watermen ashore; but most of those who needs must fare abroad went over

London Bridge, because there, although they might in no wise see, it felt, at least, as if the world were still beneath their feet.

At noon the air was muddy brown, with a bitter taste like watered smoke; at night it was a blinding pall; and though, after mid-December, by order of the Council, every alderman and burgess hung a light before his door, torches, links, and candles only sputtered feebly in the gloom, of no more use than jack-o'-lanterns gone astray, and none but blind men knew the roads.

The city watch was doubled everywhere; and all night long their shouts went up and down—"'T is what o'clock, and a foggy night!"—and right and left their hurrying staves came thumping helplessly along the walls to answer cries of "Murder!" and of "Help! Watch! Help!" For under cover of the fog great gangs of thieves came down from Hampstead Heath, and robberies were done in the most frequented thoroughfares, between the very lights set up by the corporation; so that it was dangerous to go about save armed and wary as a cat in a crowd.

While such foul days endured there was no singing at St. Paul's, nor stage-plays anywhere, save at Blackfriars play-house, which was roofed against the weather. And even there at last the fog crept in through cracks and crannies until the players seemed but moving shadows talking through a choking cloud; and Master Will Shakspere's famous new piece of "Romeo and Juliet," which had been playing to crowded houses, taking ten pound twelve the day, was fairly smothered off the boards.



"NICK GAVE THE SILVER BUCKLE FROM HIS CLOAK TO A BOY WHO STOOD CRYING WITH COLD AND HUNGER IN THE STREET."

Nick was eager to be out in all this blindman's holiday; but, "Nay," said Carew; "not so much as thy nose. A fog like this would steal the croak from a raven's throat, let alone the sweetness from a honey-pot like thine—and bottom crust is the end of pie!" With which, bang went the door, creak went the key, and Carew was off to the Falcon Inn.

So went the winter weather, and so went Carew; for there was no denying that both had fallen into a very bad way. Yet another change came creeping over Carew all unaware.

Nick's face had from the first attracted him; and now, living with the boy day after day, housed up, a prisoner, yet cheerful through it all, the master-player began to feel what in a better man had been the prick of conscience, but in him was only an indefinite uneasiness like a blunted cockle-bur. For the lad's patient perseverance at his work, his delight in singing, and the tone of longing threaded through his voice, crept into the master-player's heart in spite of him; and Nick's gentle ways with Cicely touched him more than all the rest: for if there was one thing in all the world that Gaston Carew truly loved, it was his daughter Cicely. So for her sake, as well as for Nick's own, the master-player came to love the lad. And this was shown in queer ways.

In the wainscot of the dining-hall there was a carven panel just above the Spanish chest. At night, when the house was still and all the rest asleep, Carew often came and stood before this panel, with a queer, hesitating look upon his hard, bold face; and stretching out his hand, would press upon the head of a cherub cut in the bevel edge. Whereupon the panel slipped away within the wainscot, leaving a little closet in the hollow of the wall, in which a few strange things were stowed: an empty flask, an inlaid rosewood box, a little slipper, and a dusty gittern with its strings all snapped and a faded ribbon tied about its neck.

The rosewood box he would take down, and with it open in his lap would sit beside the fire like a man within a dream, until the hearth grew white and cold, and the draught had blown the ashes out in streaks across the floor. In the box was a woman's riding-glove and a miniature upon ivory, Cicely's mother's face, painted at Paris in other days.

One night, while they were sitting all together by the fire, Nick and Cicely snug in the chimney-seat, Carew spoke up suddenly out of a little silence which had fallen upon them all. "Nick," said he, quite softly, with a look on his face as if he were thinking of other things, "I wonder if thou couldst play?"

"What, sir?" asked Nick; "a game?" and made the bellows whistle in his mouth.

"Nay, lad; a gittern."

Nick and Cicely looked up, for his manner was very odd.

"Why, sir, I do na know. I could try. I ha' heard one played, and it is passing sweet."

"Ay, Nick, 't is passing sweet," said Carew, quickly—and no more; but spoke of France, how the lilies grow in the ditches there, and the tall trees stand like soldiers by the road that runs to the land of sunny hills and wine; and of the radiant women there, with hair like night and eyes like the summer stars. Then all at once he stopped as if some one had clapped a hand upon his mouth, and sat and stared into the fire.

But in the morning at breakfast there was a gittern at Nick's place—a rare old yellow gittern, with silver scrolls about the tail-piece, ivory pegs, and a head that ended in an angel's face. It was strung with bright new silver strings, but near the bridge of it there was a little rut worn into the wood by the tips of the fingers that had rested there while playing, and the silken shoulder-ribbon was faded and worn.

Nick stopped, then put out both his hands as if to touch it, yet did not, being half afraid.

"Tut, take it up!" said Carew, sharply, though he had not seemed to heed. "Take it up—it is for thee."

"For me?" cried Nick—"not for mine own?"

Carew turned and struck the table with his hand, as if suddenly wroth. "Why should I say it was for thee, if it were not to be thine own?"

"But, Master Carew—" Nick began.

"'Master Carew' fiddlesticks! Hold thy prate. Do I know my own mind, or do I filter my wits through thee? Did I not say that it is thine? Good, then—'t is thine, although it were thrice somebody else's; and thrice as much thy very own through having other owners. Dost hear? Well, then, enough—we 'll have no words about it!"

Rising abruptly as he spoke, he clapped his hat upon his head and left the room, Nick standing there beside the table, staring after him, with the gittern in his hands.

CHAPTER XXVI

TO SING BEFORE THE QUEEN

"Sir Fly hangs dead on the window-pane;
The frost doth wind his shroud;
Through the halls of his little summer house
The north wind cries aloud.
We will bury his bones in the mouldy wall,
And mourn for the noble slain:
A southerly wind and a sunny sky—
Buzz! up he comes again!
Oh, Master Fly!"

NICK looked up from the music-rack and shivered. He had forgotten the fire in studying his song, and the blackened ends of the burnt-out logs lay smouldering on the hearth. The draught, too, whistled shrilly under the door, in spite of the rushes that he had piled along the crack.

The fog had been gone for a week. It was snapping cold; and through the peep-holes he had thawed upon the window-pane with his breath, he could see the hoar-frost lying in the shadow of the wall in the court below.

How forlorn the green old dial looked out there alone in the cold, with the winter dust whirling around it in little eddies upon the wind! The dial was fringed with icicles, like an old man's beard; and even the creeping shadow on its face, which told mid-afternoon, seemed frozen where it fell.

Mid-afternoon already, and he so much to do! Nick pulled his cloak about him, and turned to his song again:

"Sir Fly hangs dead on the window-pane;
The frost doth wind his shroud—"

But there he stopped; for the boys were singing in the great hall below, and the whole house rang with the sound of the roaring chorus:

"Down-a-down, hey, down-a-down,
Hey derry derry down-a-down!"

Nick put his fingers in his ears, and began all over again:

"Sir Fly hangs dead on the window-pane;
The frost doth wind his shroud;
Through the halls of his little summer house
The north wind cries aloud."

But it was no use; all he could hear was:

"Down-a-down, hey, down-a-down,
Hey derry derry down-a-down!"

How could a fellow study in a noise like that? He gave it up in despair, and kicking the chunks together, stood upon the hearth, warming his hands by the gathering blaze while he listened to the song:

"Cold 's the wind, and wet 's the rain;
Saint Hugh, be our good speed!
Ill is the weather that bringeth no gain,
Nor helps good hearts in need.

"Down-a-down, hey, down-a-down,
Hey derry derry down-a-down!"

He could hear Colley Warren above them all. What a voice the boy had! Like a golden horn blowing in the fresh of a morning breeze. It made Nick tingle, he could not tell why. He and Colley often sang together, and their voices made a quivering in the air like the ringing of a bell. And often, while they sang, the viols standing in the corner of the room would sound aloud a deep, soft note in harmony with them, although nobody had touched the strings; so that the others cried out that the instruments were bewitched, and would not let the boys sing any more. Colley Warren was Nick's best friend—a dark-eyed, quiet lad, as gentle as a girl, and with a mouth like a girl's mouth, for which the others sometimes mocked him, though they loved him none the less.

It was not because his voice was loud that it could be so distinctly heard; but it was nothing like the rest, and came through all the others like sunshine through a mist. Nick pulled the stool up closer, and sat down in the chimney-corner, humming a second to the tune, and blowing little glory-holes in the embers with the bellows. He liked the smell of a wood fire, and liked to toast his toes. He was a trifle drowsy, too, now that he was warm again to the marrow of his bones; perhaps he dozed a little.

But suddenly he came to himself again with a sense of a great stillness fallen over everything—no singing in the room below, and silence everywhere but in the court, where there was a trampling as of horses standing at the gate. And while he was still lazily wondering, a great cheer broke out in the room below, and there was a stamping of feet like cattle galloping over a bridge; and then, all at once, the door opened into the hallway at the foot of the stair, and the sound burst out as fire bursts from the cock-loft window of a burning barn, and through the noise and over it Colley Warren's voice calling him by name: "Skylark! Nick Skylark! Ho there, Nick! where art thou?"

He sprang to the door and kicked the rushes away. All the hall was full of voices, laughing, shouting, singing, and cheering. There were footsteps coming up the stair. "What there, Skylark! Ho, boy! Nick, where art thou?" he could hear Colley calling above them all. Out he popped his nose: "Here I am, Colley—what 's to do? *Whatever in the world!*" and he ducked his head like a mandarin; for whizz—flap! two books came whirling up the stair and thumped against the panel by his ears.

"The news—the news, Nick! Have ye heard the news?" the lads were shouting as if possessed. "We 're going to court! Hurrah, hurrah!" And some, with their arms about one another, went whirling out at the door and around the windy close like very madcaps, cutting such capers that the horses standing at the gate kicked up their heels, and jerked the horse-boys right and left like bundles of hay.

Nick leaned over the railing and stared.

"Come down and help us sing!" they cried. "Come down and shout with us in the street!"

"I can na come down—there 's work to do!"

"Thy 'can na' be hanged, and thy work likewise! Come down and sing, or we 'll fetch thee down. The Queen hath sent for us!"

"The Queen—hath sent—for us?"

"Ay, sent for us to come to court and play on Christmas day! Hurrah for Queen Bess!"

At that shrill cheer the startled horses fairly plunged into the street, and the carts that were passing along the way were jammed against the opposite wall. The carriers bellowed, the horse-boys bawled, the people came running to see the row, and the apprentices flew out of the shops bareheaded, waving their dirty aprons and cheering lustily, just for the fun of the chance to cheer.

"It 's true!" called Colley, his dark eyes dancing like stars on the sea. "Come down, Nick, and sing in the street with us all! We are going to Greenwich Palace on Christmas day to play before the Queen and the court—for the first time, Nick, in a good six years; and we 're not to work till the new masque comes from the Master of the Revels! Come down, Nick, and sing with us out in the street; for we 're going to court, we 're going to court to sing before the Queen! Hurrah, hurrah!"

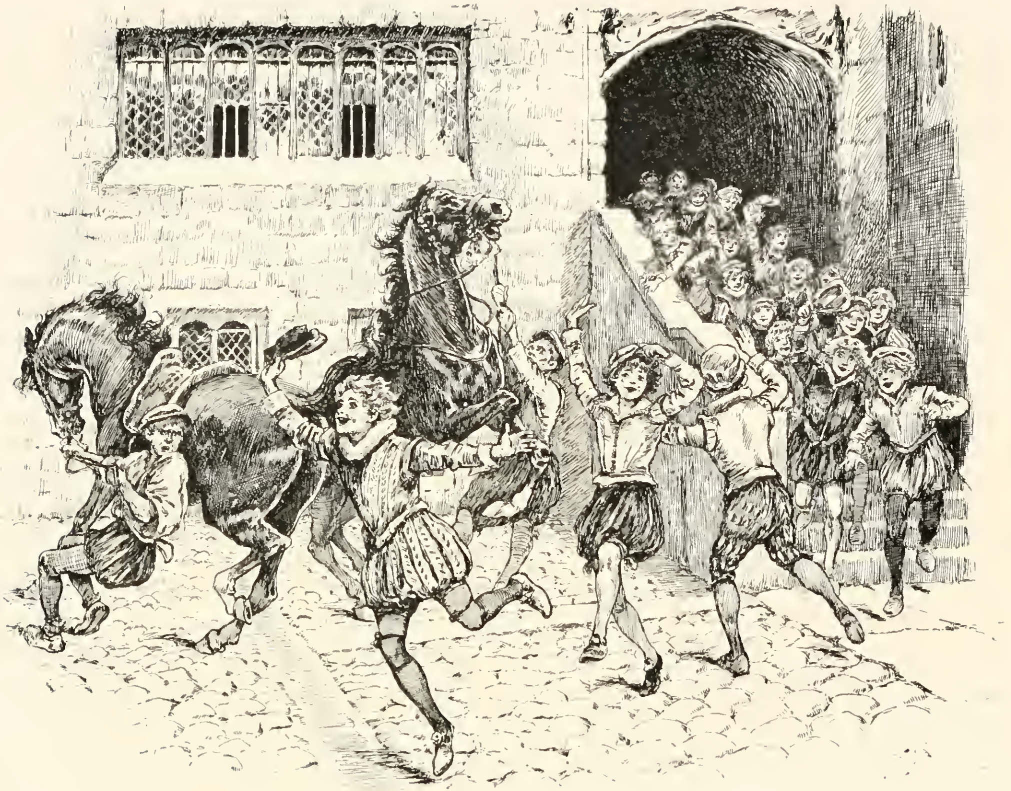
"Hurrah for good Queen Bess!" cried Nick; and up went his cap and down went he on the baluster-rail like a runaway sled, head first into the crowd, who caught him laughing as he came. Then all together they cantered out like a parcel of colts in a fresh, green field, and sang in the street before the school till the people cheered themselves hoarse to hear such music on such a wintry day; sang until there was no other business on all the thoroughfare but just to listen to their songs; sang until the under-masters came out with their staves and drove them into the school again, to keep them from straining their throats by singing so loudly and so long in the frosty open air.

But a fig for staves and for under-masters! The boys clapped fast the gates behind them, and barred the under-masters out in the street, singing twice as loudly as before, and mocking at them with wry faces through the bars; and then trooped off up the old precentor's private stair and sang at his door until the old man could not hear his own ears, and came out storming and grim as grief.

But when he saw the boys all there, and heard them cheering him three times three, he could not storm to save his life, but only stood there, black and thin, against the yellow square of light, smiling a quaint smile that half was wrinkles and half was pride, shaking his lean forefinger at them as if he were beating time, and nodding until his head seemed almost nodding off.

"Hurrah for Master Nathaniel Gyles!" they shouted.

"*Primus Magister Scholarum, Custos Morum, Quartus Custos Rotulorum,*" said the old man softly to himself, the



"WE'RE GOING TO COURT! WE'RE GOING TO COURT!"

firelight from behind him falling in a glory on his thin white hair. "Be off, ye rogues! Ye are not fit to waste good language on; or, faith, I 'd Latin ye all as dumb as fishes in the depths of the briny sea!"

"Hurrah for the fishes in the sea!"

"Soft, ye knaves! Save thy throats for good Queen Bess!"

"Hurrah for good Queen Bess!"

"Be still, I say, ye good-for-nothing varlets; or ye sha'n't have pie and ale to-night. But marry, now, ye *shall* have pie—ay, pie and ale without a stint; for ye are good lads, and ye have pleased the Queen at last; and I am as proud of ye as a peacock is of his own tail!"

"Hurrah for the Queen—and the pie—and the ale! Hurrah for the peacock and his tail!" shouted the boys; and straightway, seeing that they had made a rhyme, they gave a cheer shriller and longer than all the others put together, and went clattering down the stairway, singing at the top of their lungs:

"Hurrah for the Queen, and the pie and the ale!
Hurrah for the peacock, hurrah for his tail!
Hurrah for hurrah, and hurrah again—
We 're going to court on Christmas day
To sing before the Queen!"

"Good lads, good lads!" said the old precentor to himself, as he turned back into his little room. His eyes were shining proudly in the candle-light, yet the tears were running down his cheeks. A queer old man, Nat Gyles, and dead this many a long, long year; yet that night no man was happier than he.

But Master Gaston Carew, who had come for Nick, stood in the gathering dusk by the gate below, and stared up at the yellow square of light with a troubled look upon his reckless face.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE QUEEN'S PLAISANCE

IT was a frosty morning when they all marched down to the boats that bumped along Paul's wharf.

The roofs of London were white with frost and rosy with the dawn. In the shadow of the walls the air lay in still pools of smoky blue; and in the east the horizon stretched like a swamp of fire. The winking lights on London Bridge were pale. The bridge itself stood cold and gray, mysterious and dim as the stream below, but here and there along its crest red-hot with a touch of flame from the burning eastern sky. Out of the river, running inland with the tide, came steamy shreds that drifted here and there. Then over the roofs of London town the sun sprang up like a thing of life, and the veil of twilight vanished in bright day with a million sparkles rippling on the stream.

Warm with piping roast and cordial, keen with excitement, and blithe with the sharp, fresh air, the red-cheeked lads skipped and chattered along the landing like a flock of sparrows alighted by chance in a land of crumbs.

"Into the wherries, every one!" cried the old precentor. "*Ad unum omnes,* great and small!"

"Into the wherries!" echoed the under-masters.

"Into the wherries, my bullies!" roared old Brueton the boatman, fending off with a rusty hook as red as his bristling beard. "Into the wherries, yarely all, and we 's catch the turn o' the tide! 'T is gone high water now!"

Then away they went, three wherries full, and Master Gyles behind them in a brisk sixpenny tilt-boat, resplendent in new ash-colored hose, a cloak of black velvet fringed with gold, and a brand-new periwig curled and frizzed like a brush-heap in a gale of wind.

How they had worked for the last few days! New songs, new dances, new lines to learn; gallant compliments for the Queen, who was as fond of flattery as a girl; new clothes, new slippers and caps to try, and a thousand what-nots more. The school had hummed like a busy mill from morning until night. And now that the grinding was done and they had come at last to their reward,—the hoped-for summons to the court, which had been sought so long in vain,—the boys of St. Paul's bubbled with glee until the under-masters were in a cold sweat for fear their precious charges would pop from the wherries into the Thames, like so many exuberant corks.

They cheered with delight as London Bridge was shot and the boats went flying down the Pool, past Billingsgate and the oystermen, the White Tower and the Traitors' Gate, past the shipping, where brown, foreign-looking faces stared at them above sea-battered bulwarks.

The sun was bright and the wind was keen; the air sparkled, and all the world was full of life. Hammers beat in the builders' yards; wild bargees sang hoarsely as they drifted down to the Isle of Dogs; and in slow ships that crept away to catch the wind in the open stream below, with tawny sails drooping and rimmed with frost, they heard the hail of salty mariners.

The tide ran strong, and the steady oars carried them swiftly down. London passed; then solitary hamlets here and there; then dun fields running to the river's edge like thirsty deer.

In Deptford Reach some lords who were coming down by water passed them, racing with a little Dutch boat from Deptford to the turn. Their boats had holly-bushes at their prows and holiday garlands along their sides. They were all shouting gaily, and the stream was bright with their scarlet cloaks, Lincoln-green jerkins, and gold embroidery. But they were very badly beaten, at which they laughed, and threw the Dutchmen a handful of silver pennies. Thereupon the Dutchmen stood up in their boat and bowed like jointed ninepins; and the lords, not to be outdone, stood up likewise in their boats and bowed very low in return, with their hands upon their breasts. Then everybody on the river laughed, and the boys gave three cheers for the merry lords and three more for the sturdy Dutchmen. The Dutchmen shouted back, "Goot Yule!" and bowed and bowed until their boat turned round and went stern foremost down the stream, so that they were bowing to the opposite bank, where no one was at all. At this the rest all laughed again till their sides ached, and cheered them twice as much as they had before.

And while they were cheering and waving their caps, the boatmen rested upon their oars and let the boats swing with the tide, which thereabout set strong against the shore, and a trumpeter in the Earl of Arundel's barge stood up and blew upon a long horn bound with a banner of blue and gold.

Instantly he had blown, another trumpet answered from the south, and when Nick turned, the shore was gay with men in brilliant livery. Beyond was a wood of chestnut-trees as blue and leafless as a grove of spears; and in the plain between the river and the wood stood a great palace of gray stone, with turrets, pinnacles, and battlemented walls, over the topmost tower of which a broad flag, blazoned with golden lions and silver lilies square for square, whipped the winter wind. Amid a group of towers large and small a lofty stack poured out a plume of sea-coal smoke against the milky sky, and on the countless windows in the wall the sunlight flashed with dazzling radiance.

There were people on the battlements, and at the port between two towers where the Queen went in and out the press was so thick that men's heads looked like the cobbles in the street.

The shore was stayed with piling and with timbers like a wharf, so that a hundred boats might lie there cheek by jowl and scarcely rub their paint. The lords made way, and the children players came ashore through an aisle of uplifted oars. They were met by the yeomen of the guard, tall, brawny fellows clad in red, with golden roses on their breasts and backs, and with them marched up to the postern two and two, Master Gyles the last of all, as haughty as a Spanish don come courting fair Queen Bess.

A smoking dinner was waiting them, of whitebait with red pepper, and a yellow juice so sour that Nick's mouth drew up in a knot; but it was very good. There were besides, silver dishes full of sugared red currants, and heaps of comfits and sweetmeats, which Master Gyles would not allow them even to touch, and saffron cakes with raisins in them, and spiced hot cordial out of tiny silver cups. Bareheaded pages clad in silk and silver lace waited upon them as if they were fledgling kings; but the boys were too hungry to care for that or to try to put on airs, and waded into the meat and drink as if they had been starved for a fortnight.

But when they were done Nick saw that the table off which they had eaten was inlaid with pearl and silver filigree, and that the table-cloth was of silk with woven metal-work and gems set in it worth more than a thousand crowns. He was very glad he had eaten first, for such wonderful service would have taken away his appetite.

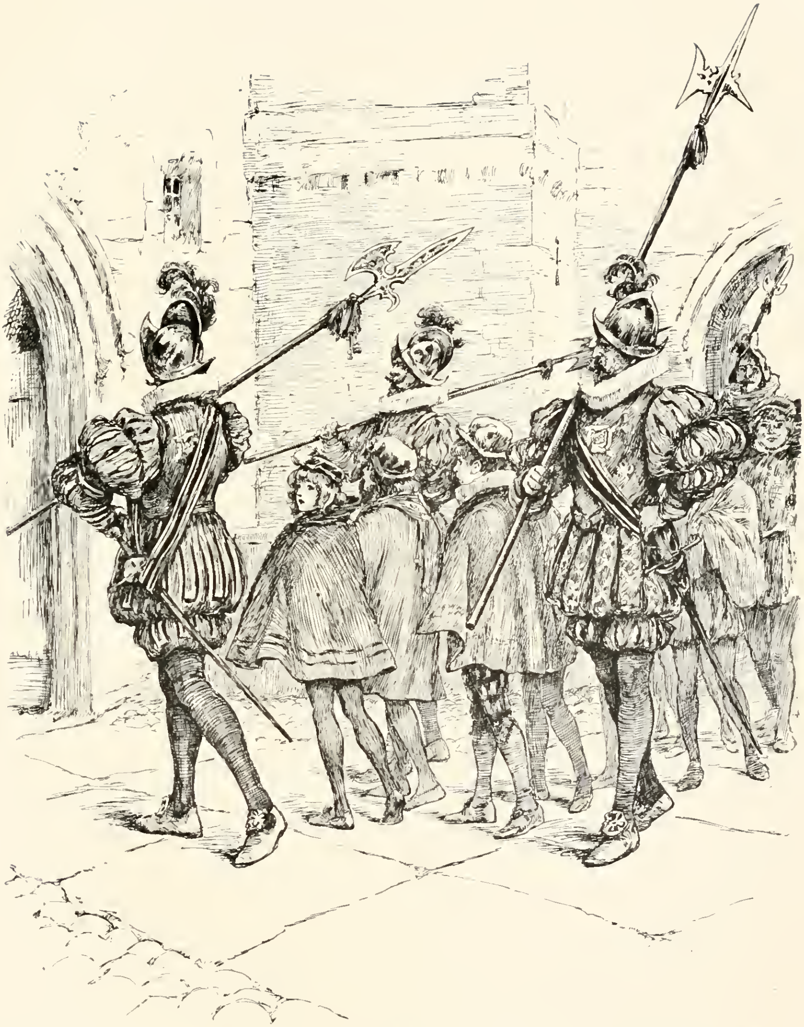
And truly a wonderful palace was the Queen's Plaisance, as Greenwich House was called. Elizabeth was born in it, and so loved it most of all. There she pleased oftenest to receive and grant audiences to envoys from foreign courts. And there, on that account, as was always her proud, jealous way, she made a blinding show of glory and of wealth, of science, art, and power, that England, to the eyes which saw her there, might stand in second place to no dominion in the world, however rich or great.

It was a very house of gold.

Over the door where the lads marched in was the Queen's device, a golden rose, with a motto set below in letters of gold, "Dieu et mon droit"; and upon the walls were blazoned coats of noble arms on branching golden trees, of purest metal and finest silk, costly beyond compare. The royal presence-chamber shone with tapestries of gold, of silver, and of oriental silks, of as many shifting colors as the birds of paradise, and wrought in exquisite design. The throne was set with diamonds, with rubies, garnets, and sapphires, glittering like a pastry-crust of stars, and garnished with gold-lace work, pearls, and ornament; and under the velvet canopy which hung above the throne was embroidered in seed-pearls, "Vivat Regina Elizabetha!" There was no door without a gorgeous usher, no room without a page, no corridor without a guard, no post without a man of noble birth to fill it.

On the walls of the great gallery were masterly paintings of great folk, globes showing all the stars fast in the sky, and drawings of the world and all its parts, so real that one could see the savages in the New World hanging to the under side by their feet, like flies upon the ceiling. How they stuck was more than Nick could make out; and where they landed if they chanced to slip and fall troubled him a deal, until in the sheer multiplication of wonders he could not wonder any more.

When they came to rehearse in the afternoon the stage



"THEY WERE MET BY THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD, AND WERE MARCHED UP TO THE POSTERN TWO AND TWO."

was hung with stiff, rich silks that had come in costly cedar chests from the looms of old Cathay; and the curtain behind which the players came and went was broidered with gold thread in flowers and birds like meteors for splendor. The gallery, too, where the musicians sat, was draped with silk and damask.

Some of the lads would have made out by their great airs as if this were all a common thing to them; but Nick stared honestly with round eyes, and went about with cautious feet, chary of touching things, and feeling very much out of place and shy.

It was all too grand, too wonderful,—amazing to look upon, no doubt, and good to outface foreign envy with, but not to be endured every day nor lived with comfortably. And as the day went by, each passing moment with new marvels, Nick grew more and more uneasy for some simple little nook where he might just sit down and be quiet for a while, as one could do at home, without fine pages peering at him from the screens, or splendid guards patrolling at his heels wherever he went, or obsequious ushers bowing to the floor at every turn, and asking him what he might be pleased to wish. And by the time night fell and the attendant came to light them to their beds, he felt like a fly on the rim of a wheel that went so fast he could scarcely get his breath or see what passed him by, yet of which he durst not let go.

The palace was much too much for him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHRISTMAS WITH QUEEN BESS

CHRISTMAS morning came and went as if on swallow-wings, in a gale of royal merriment. Four hundred sat to dinner that day in Greenwich halls, and all the palace streamed with banners and green garlands.

Within the courtyard two hundred horses neighed and stamped around a water-fountain playing in a bowl of ice and evergreen. Grooms and pages, hostlers and dames, went hurry-scurrying to and fro; cooks, bakers, and scullions steamed about, leaving hot, mouth-watering streaks of fragrance in the air; bluff men-at-arms went whistling here and there; and serving-maids with rosy cheeks ran breathlessly up and down the winding stairways.

The palace stirred like a mighty pot that boils to its utmost verge, for the hour of the revelries was come.

Over the beech-wood and far across the black heath where Jack Cade marshaled the men of Kent, the wind trembled with the boom of the castle bell. Within the walls of the palace its clang was muffled by a sound of voices that rose and fell like the wind upon the sea.

The ambassadors of Venice and France were there, with their courtly trains. The Lord High Constable of England was come to sit below the Queen. The earls, too, of Southampton, Montgomery, Pembroke, and Huntington were there; and William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, the Queen's High Treasurer, to smooth his care-lined forehead with a Yule-tide jest.

Up from the entry ports came shouts of "Room! room! room for my Lord Strange! Room for the Duke of Devonshire!" and about the outer gates there was a tumult like the cheering of a great crowd.

The palace corridors were lined with guards. Gentlemen pensioners under arms went flashing to and fro. Now and then through the inner throng some handsome page with wind-blown hair and rainbow-colored cloak pushed to the great door, calling: "Way, sirs, way for my Lord—way for my Lady of Alderstone!" and one by one, or in blithe groups, the courtiers, clad in silks and satins, velvets, jewels, and lace of gold, came up through the lofty folding-doors to their places in the hall.

There, where the Usher of the Black Rod stood, and the gentlemen of the chamber came and went with golden chains about their necks, was bowing and scraping without stint, and reverent civility; for men that were wise and noble were passing by, men that were handsome and brave; and ladies sweet as a summer day, and as fair to see as spring, laughed by their sides and chatted behind their fans, or daintily nibbled comfits, lacking anything to say.

The windows were all curtained in, making a night-time in midday; and from the walls and galleries flaring links and great bouquets of candles threw an eddying flood of yellow light across the stirring scene. From clump to clump of banner-staves and burnished arms, spiked above the wainscot, garlands of red-berried holly, spruce, and mistletoe were twined across the tapestry, till all the room was bound about with a chain of living green.

There were sweet odors floating through the air, and hazy threads of fragrant smoke from perfumes burning in rich braziers; and under foot was the crisp, clean rustle of new rushes.

From time to time, above the hum of voices, came the sound of music from a room beyond—cornets and flutes, fifes, lutes, and harps, with an organ exquisitely played, and voices singing to it; and from behind the players' curtain, swaying slowly on its rings at the back of the stage, came a murmur of whispering childish voices, now high in eager questioning, now low, rehearsing some doubtful fragment of a song.

Behind the curtain it was dark—not total darkness, but twilight; for a dull glow came down overhead from the lights in the hall without, and faint yellow bars went up and down the dusk from crevices in the screen. The boys stood here and there in nervous groups. Now and then a sharp complaint was heard from the tire-woman when an impatient lad would not stand still to be dressed.

Master Gyles went to and fro, twisting the manuscript of the Revel in his hands, or pausing kindly to pat some faltering lad upon the back. Nick and Colley were peeping by turns through a hole in the screen at the throng in the audience-chamber.

They could see a confusion of fans, jewels, and faces, and now and again could hear a burst of subdued laughter over the steadily increasing buzz of voices. Then from the gallery above, all at once there came a murmur of instruments tuning together; a voice in the corridor was heard calling, "Way here, way here!" in masterful tones; the tall folding-doors at the side of the hall swung wide, and eight dapper pages in white and gold came in with the Master of Revels. After them came fifty ladies and noblemen clad in white and gold, and a guard of gentlemen pensioners with glittering halberds.

There was a sharp rustle. Every head in the audience-chamber louted low. Nick's heart gave a jump—for the Queen was there!

She came with an air that was at once serious and royal, bearing herself haughtily, yet with a certain grace and sprightliness that became her very well. She was quite tall and well made, and her quickly changing face was long and fair, though wrinkled and no longer young. Her complexion was clear and of an olive hue; her nose was a little hooked; her firm lips were thin; and her small black eyes, though keen and bright, were pleasant and merry withal. Her hair was a coppery, tawny red, and false, moreover. In her ears hung two great pearls; and there was a fine small crown studded with diamonds upon her head, beside a necklace of exceeding fine gold and jewels about her neck. She was attired in a white silk gown bordered with pearls the size of beans, and over it wore a mantle of black silk, cunningly shot with silver threads. Her ruff was vast, her farthingale vaster; and her train, which was very long, was borne by a marchioness who made more ado about it than Elizabeth did of ruling her realm.

"The Queen!" gasped Colley.

"Dost think I did na know it?" answered Nick, his heart beginning to beat tattoo as he stared through the peep-hole in the screen.

He saw the great folk bowing like a gardenful of flowers in a storm, and in its midst Elizabeth erect, speaking to those about her in a lively and good-humored way, and addressing all the foreigners according to their tongue—in French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch; but hers was funny Dutch, and while she spoke she smiled and made a joke upon it in Latin, at which they all laughed heartily, whether they understood what it meant or not. Then, with her ladies in waiting, she passed to a dais near the stage, and stood a moment, stately, fair, and proud, while all her nobles made obeisance, then sat and gave a signal for the players to begin.

"Rafe Fullerton!" the prompter whispered shrilly; and out from behind the screen slipped Rafe, the smallest of them all, and down the stage to speak the foreword of the piece. He was frightened, and his voice shook as he spoke, but every one was smiling, so he took new heart.

"It is a masque of Summer-time and Spring," said he, "wherein both claim to be best-loved, and have their say of wit and humor, and each her part of songs and dances suited to her time, the sprightly galliard and the nimble jig for Spring, the slow pavone, the stately peacock dance, for Summer-time. And win who may, fair Summer-time or merry Spring, the winner is but that beside our Queen!" —with which he snapped his fingers in the faces of them all—"God save Queen Bess!"

At that the Queen's eyes twinkled, and she nodded, highly pleased, so that every one clapped mightily.

The play soon ran its course amid great laughter and applause. Spring won. The English ever loved her best, and the quick-paced galliard took their fancy, too. "Up and be doing!" was its tune, and it gave one a chance to cut fine capers with his heels.

Then the stage stood empty and the music stopped.

At this strange end a whisper of surprise ran through the hall. The Queen tapped with the inner side of her rings upon the broad arm of her chair. From the look on her face she was whetting her tongue. But before she could speak, Nick and Colley, dressed as a farmer boy and girl, with a garland of house-grown flowers about them, came down the stage from the arras, hand in hand, bowing.

The audience-chamber grew very still—*this* was something new. Nick felt a swallowing in his throat, and Colley's hand winced in his grip. There was no sound but a silky rustling in the room.

Then suddenly the boys behind the players' curtain laughed together, not loud, but such a jolly little laugh that all the people smiled to hear it. After the laughter came a hush.

Then the pipes overhead made a merry sound as of shepherds piping on oaten straws in new grass where there are daisies; and there was a little elfish laughter of clarionets, and a fluttering among the cool flutes like spring wind blowing through crisp young leaves in April. The harps began to pulse and throb with a soft cadence like raindrops falling into a clear pool where brown leaves lie upon the bottom and bubbles float above green stones and smooth white pebbles. Nick lifted up his head and sang.

It was a happy little song of the coming and the triumph of the spring. The words were all forgotten long ago. They were not much: enough to serve the turn, no more; but the notes to which they went were like barn swallows twittering under the eaves, goldfinches clinking in purple weeds beside old roads, and robins singing in common gardens at dawn. And wherever Nick's voice ran Colley's followed, the pipes laughing after them a note or two below; while the flutes kept gurgling softly to themselves as a hill brook gurgles through the woods, and the harps ran gently up and down like rain among the daffodils. One voice called, the other answered; there were echo-like refrains; and as they sang Nick's heart grew full. He cared not a stiver for the crowd, the golden palace, or the great folk there—the Queen no more—he only listened for Colley's voice coming up lovingly after his own and running away when he followed it down, like a lad and a lass through the bloom of the May. And Colley was singing as if his heart would leap out of his round mouth for joy to follow after the song they sung, till they came to the end and the skylark's song.

There Colley ceased, and Nick went singing on alone, forgetting, caring for, heeding nought but the song that was in his throat.

The Queen's fan dropped from her hand upon the floor. No one saw it or picked it up. The Venetian ambassador scarcely breathed.

Nick came down the stage, his hands before him, lifted as if he saw the very lark he followed with his song, up, up, up into the sun. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were wet, though his voice was a song and a laugh in one.

Then they were gone behind the curtain, into the shadow and the twilight there, Colley with his arms about Nick's neck, not quite laughing, not quite sobbing. The manuscript of the Revel lay torn in two upon the floor, and Master Gyles had a foot upon each piece.

In the hall beyond the curtain was a silence that was deeper than a hush, a stillness rising from the hearts of men.

Then Elizabeth turned in the chair where she sat. Her eyes were as bright as a blaze. And out of the sides of her eyes she looked at the Venetian ambassador. He was sitting far out on the edge of his chair, and his lips had fallen apart. She laughed to herself. "It is a good song, signor," said she, and those about her started at the sound of her voice. "*Chi tace confessa*—it is so! There are no songs like English songs—there is no spring like an English spring—there is no land like England, *my* England!" She clapped her hands. "I will speak with those lads," said she.

Straightway certain pages ran through the press and came behind the curtain where Nick and Colley stood together, still trembling with the music not yet gone out of them, and brought them through the hall to where the Queen sat, every one whispering, "Look!" as they passed.

On the dais they knelt together, bowing, side by side. Elizabeth, with a kindly smile, leaning a little forward, raised them with her slender hand. "Stand, dear lads," said she, heartily. "Be lifted up by thine own singing, as our hearts have been uplifted by thy song. And name me the price of that same song—'t was sweeter than the sweetest song we ever heard before."

"Or ever shall hear again," said the Venetian ambassador, under his breath, rubbing his forehead as if just wakening out of a dream.

"Come," said Elizabeth, tapping Colley's cheek with her fan, "what wilt thou have of me, fair maid?"

Colley turned red, then very pale. "That I may stay in the palace forever and sing for your Majesty," said he. His fingers shivered in Nick's.

"Now that is right prettily asked," she cried, and was well pleased. "Thou shalt indeed stay for a singing page in our household—a voice and a face like thine are merry things upon a rainy Monday. And thou, Master Lark," said she, fanning the hair back from Nick's forehead with her perfumed fan—"thou that comest up out of the field with a song like the angels sing—what wilt thou have: that thou mayst sing in our choir and play on the lute for us?"

Nick looked up at the torches on the wall, drawing a deep, long breath. When he looked down again his eyes were dazzled and he could not see the Queen.

"What wilt thou have?" he heard her ask.

"Let me go home," said he.

There were red and green spots in the air. He tried to count them, since he could see nothing else, and everything was very still; but they all ran into one purple spot which came and went like a firefly's glow, and in the middle of the purple spot he saw the Queen's face coming and going.

"Surely, boy, that is an ill-considered speech," said she, "or thou dost deem us very poor, or most exceeding stingy!" Nick hung his head, for the walls seemed tapestried with staring eyes. "Or else this home of thine must be a very famous place."

The maids of honour tittered. Further off somebody laughed. Nick looked up, and squared his shoulders.

They had rubbed the cat the wrong way.

It is hard to be a stranger in a palace, young, country-bred, and laughed at all at once; but down in Nick Attwood's heart was a stubborn streak that all the flattery on earth could not cajole nor ridicule efface. He might be simple, shy, and slow, but what he loved he loved: that much he knew; and when they laughed at him for loving home they seemed to mock not him, but home—and *that* touched the fighting-spot.

"I would rather be there than here," said he.

The Queen's face flushed. "Thou art more curt than courteous," said she. "Is it not good enough for thee here?"

"I could na live in such a place."

The Queen's eyes snapped. "In such a place? Marry, art thou so choice? These others find no fault with the life."

"Then they be born to it," said Nick, "or they could abide no more than I—they would na fit."

"Haw, haw!" said the Lord High Constable.

The Queen shot one quick glance at him. "Old pegs have been made to fit new holes before to-day," said she; "and the trick can be done again." The Constable smothered the rest of that laugh in his hand. "But come, boy, speak up; what hath put thee so out of conceit with our best-beloved palace?"

"There is na one thing likes me here. I can na bide in a place so fine, for there 's not so much as a corner in it feels like home. I could na sleep in the bed last night."

"What, how? We commanded good beds!" exclaimed Elizabeth, angrily, for the Venetian ambassador was smiling in his beard. "This shall be seen to."

"Oh, it *was* a good bed—a very good bed indeed, your Majesty!" cried Nick. "But the mattress puffed up like a cloud in a bag, and almost smothered me; and it was so soft and so hot that it gave me a fever."

Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and laughed. The Lord High Constable hastily finished the laugh that he had hidden in his hand. Everybody laughed. "Upon my word," said the Queen, "it is an odd skylark cannot sleep in feathers! What didst thou do, forsooth?"

"I slept in the coverlid on the floor," said Nick. "It was na hurt,—I dusted the place well,—and I slept like a top."

"Now verily," laughed Elizabeth, "if it be floors that thou dost desire, we have acres to spare—thou shalt have thy pick of the lot. Come, we are ill used to begging people to be favored—thou 'lt stay?"

Nick shook his head.

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed the Queen, "it is a queer fancy makes a face at such a pleasant dwelling! What is it sticks in thy throat?"

Nick stood silent. What was there to say? If he came here he never would see Stratford town again; and *this* was no abiding-place for him. They would not even let him go to the fountain himself to draw water with which to wash, but fetched it, three at a time, in a silver ewer and a copper basin with towels and a flask of perfume.

Elizabeth was tapping with her fan. "Thou art bedazzled like," she said. "Think twice—preferment does not gooseberry on the hedge-row every day; and this is a rare chance which hangs ripening on thy tongue. Consider well. Come, thou wilt accept?"

Nick slowly shook his head.

"Go then, if thou wilt go!" said she; and as she spoke she shrugged her shoulders, illy pleased, and turning toward Colley, took him by the hand and drew him closer to her, smiling at his guise. "Thy comrade hath more wit."

"He hath no mother," Nick said quietly, loosing his hold at last on Colley's hand. "I would rather have my mother than his wit."

Elizabeth turned sharply back. Her keen eyes were sparkling, yet soft.

"Thou art no fool," said she.

A little murmur ran through the room.

She sat a moment, silent, studying his face. "Or if thou art, upon my word I like the breed. It is a stubborn, froward dog; but Hold-fast is his name. Ay, sirs," she said, and sat up very straight, looking into the faces of her court, "Brag is a good dog, but Hold-fast is better A lad who loves his mother thus makes a man who loveth his native land—and it 's no bad streak in the blood. Master Skylark, thou shalt have thy wish; to London thou shalt go this very night."

"I do na live in London," Nick began.

"What matters the place?" said she. "Live wheresoever thine heart doth please. It is enough—so. Thou mayst kiss our hand." She held her hand out, bright with jewels. He knelt and kissed it as if it were all a doing in a dream, or in some unlikely story he had read. But a long while after he could smell the perfume from her slender fingers on his lips.

Then a page standing by him touched his arm as he arose, and bowing backward from the throne, came with him to the curtain and the rest. Old Master Gyles was standing there apart. It was too dark to see his face, but he laid his hand upon Nick's head.

"Thy cake is burned to a coal," said he.

CHAPTER XXIX

BACK TO GASTON CAREW

SO they marched back out of the palace gates, down to the landing-place, the last red sunlight gleaming on the basinets of the tall halberdiers who marched on either side.

Nick looked out toward London, where the river lay like a serpent, bristling with masts; and beyond the river and the town to the forests of Epping and Hainault; and beyond the forests to the hills, where the waning day still lingered in a mist of frosty blue. At their back, midway of the Queen's park, stood up the old square tower Mirefleur, and on its top one yellow light like the flame of a gigantic candle. The day seemed builded of memories strange and untrue.

A belated gull flapped by them heavily, and the red sun went down. England was growing lonely. A great barge laden with straw came out of the dusk, and was gone without a sound, its ghostly sail drawing in a wind that the wherry sat too low to feel. Nick held his breath as the barge went by: it was unreal, fantastical.

Then the river dropped between its banks, and the woods and the hills were gone. The tide ran heavily against the shore, and the wake of the wherry broke the floating stars into cold white streaks and zigzag ripplings of raveled light that ran unsteadily after them. The craft at anchor in the Pool had swung about upon the flow, and pointed down to Greenwich. A hush had fallen upon the never-ending bustle of the town; and the air was full of a gray, uncanny afterglow which seemed to come up out of the water, for the sky was grown quite dark.

They were all wrapped in their boat-cloaks, tired and silent. Now and then Nick dipped his fingers into the cold water over the gunwale.

This was the end of the glory.

He wished the boat would go a little faster. Yet when they came to the landing he was sorry.

The man-at-arms who went with him to Master Carew's house was one of the Earl of Arundel's men, in a stiff-wadded jacket of heron-blue, with the earl's colors richly worked upon its back and his badge upon the sleeves. Prowlers gave way before him in the streets, for he was broad and tall and mighty, and the fear of any man was not in the look of his eye.

As they came up the slow hill, Nick sighed, for the long-legged man-at-arms walked fast. "What, there!" said he, and clapped Nick on the shoulder with his bony hand; "art far spent, lad? Why, marry, get thee upon my back. I 'll jog thee home in the shake of a black sheep's tail."

So Nick rode home upon the back of the Earl of Arundel's man-at-arms; and that, too, seemed a dream like all the rest.

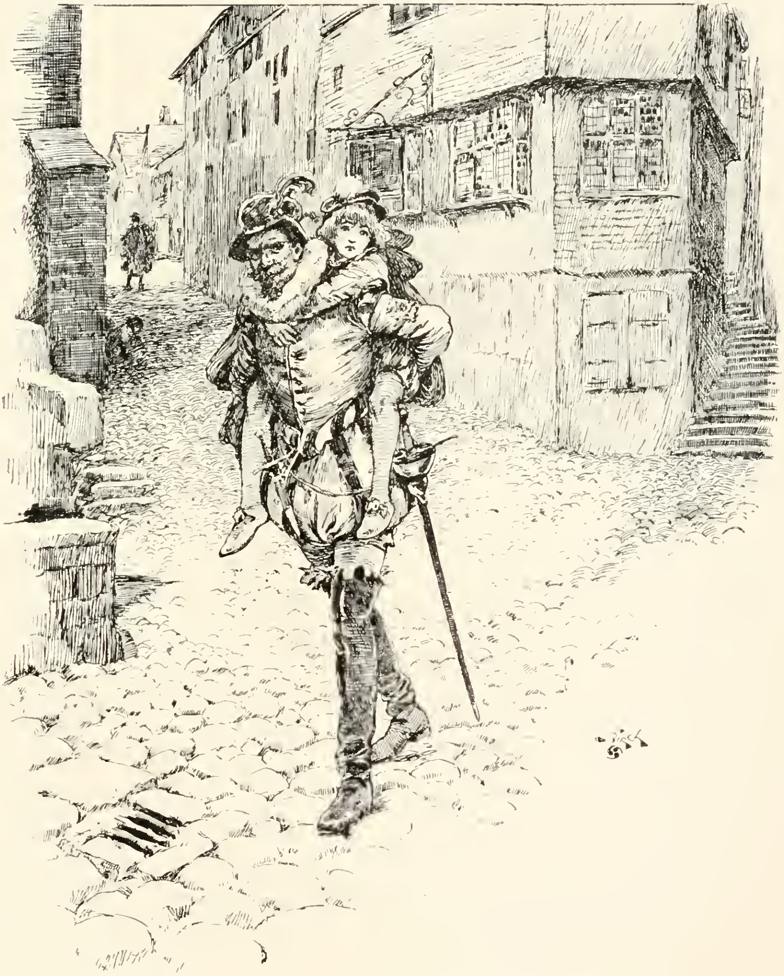
When they came to Master Carew's house the street was dark, and Nick's foot was asleep. He stamped it, tingling, upon the step, and the empty passage echoed with the sound. Then the earl's man beat the door with the pommel of his dagger-hilt, and stood with his hands upon his hips, carelessly whistling a little tune.

Nick heard a sound of some one coming through the hall, and felt that at last the day was done. A tired wonder wakened in his heart at how so much had come to pass in such a little while; yet more he wondered why it had ever come to pass at all. And what was the worth of it, anyway, now it was over and gone?

Then the door opened, and he went in.

Master Gaston Carew himself had come to the door, walking quickly through the hallway, with a queer, nervous twitching in his face. But when he made out through the dusk that it was Nick, he seemed in no wise moved, and said quite simply, as he gave the man-at-arms a penny: "Oh, is it thou? Why, we have heard somewhat of thee; and upon my word I thought, since thou wert grown so great, thou wouldst come home in a coach-and-four, all blowing horns!"

Nevertheless he drew Nick quickly in, and kissed him thrice; and after he had kissed him kept fast hold of his hand until they came together through the hall into the



"SO NICK RODE HOME UPON THE BACK OF THE EARL OF ARUNDEL'S MAN-AT-ARMS."

great room where Cicely was sitting quite dismally in the chimney-seat alone.

"There, Nick," said he; "tell her thyself that thou hast come back. She thought she had lost thee for good and all, and hath sung, 'Hey ho, my heart is full of woe!' the whole twilight, and would not be comforted. Come, Cicely, doff thy doleful willow—the proverb lies. 'Out of sight, out of mind'—fudge! the boy 's come back again! A plague take proverbs, anyway!"

But when the children were both long since abed, and all the house was still save for the scamper of rats in the wall, the heavy door of Nick's room opened stealthily, with a little grating upon the uneven sill, and Master Carew stood there, peeping in, his hand upon the bolt outside.

He held a rush-light in the other. Its glimmer fell across the bed upon Nick's tousled hair; and when the master-player saw the boy's head upon the pillow he started eagerly, with brightening eyes. "My soul!" he whispered to himself, a little quaver in his tone, "I would have sworn my own desire lied to me, and that he had not come at all! It cannot be—yet, verily, I am not blind. *Ma foi!* it passeth understanding—a freed skylark come back to its cage! I thought we had lost him forever."

Nick stirred in his sleep. Carew set the light on the floor. "Thou fool!" said he, and he fumbled at his pouch; "thou dear-belovèd little fool! To catch the skirts of glory in thine hand, and tread the heels of happy chance, and yet come back again to ill-starred twilight—and to me! Ai, lad, I would thou wert my son—mine own, own son; yet Heaven spare thee father such as I! For, Nick, I love thee. Yet thou dost hate me like a poison thing. And still I love thee, on my word, and on the remnant of mine honour!" His voice was husky. "Let thee go?—send thee back?—eat my sweet and have it too?—how? Nay, nay; thy happy cake would be my dough—it will not serve." He shook his head, and looked about to see that all was fast. "Yet, Nick, I say I love thee, on my soul!"

Slipping to the bedside with stealthy step, he laid a fat little Banbury cheese and some brown sweet cakes beside Nick's pillow; then came out hurriedly and barred the door.

The fire in the great hall had gone out, and the room was growing cold. The table stood by the chimney-side, where supper had been laid. Carew brought a napkin from the linen-chest, and spread it upon the board. Then he went to the server's screen and looked behind it, and tried the latches of the doors; and having thus made sure that all was safe, came back to the table again, and setting the rush-light there, turned the contents of his purse into the napkin.

There were both gold and silver. The silver he put back into the purse again; the gold he counted carefully; and as he counted, laying the pieces one by one in little heaps upon the cloth, he muttered under his breath, like a small boy adding up his sums in school, saying over and over again, "One for me, and one for thee, and two for Cicely Carew. One for me, and one for thee, and two for Cicely

Carew" ; and told the coins off in keeping with the count, so that the last pile was as large as both the others put together. Then slowly ending, "None for me, and one for thee, and two for Cicely Carew," he laid the last three nobles with the rest.

Then he arose and stood a moment listening to the silence in the house. An old he rat that was gnawing a rind on the hearth looked up, and ran a little nearer to his hole. "Tsst! come back," said Carew, "I 'm no cat!" and from the sliding panel in the wall took out a buckskin bag tied like a meal-sack with a string.

As he slipped the knot the throat of the bag sagged down, and a gold piece jangled on the floor. Carew started as if all his nerves had leaped within him at the unexpected sound, and closed the panel like a flash. Then, setting his foot upon the fallen coin, he stopped its spinning, and with one hand on his poniard, peering right and left, blew the candle out.

A little while he stood and listened in the dark; a little while his feet went to and fro in the darkness. The wind cried in the chimney. Now and then the casements shivered. The timbers in the wall creaked with the cold, and the boards in the stairway cracked. Then the old he rat came back to his rind, and his mate came out of the crack in the wall, working her whiskers hungrily and snuffing the smell of the candle-drip; for there was no sound, and the coast of rat-land was clear.

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE FALCON INN

And then there came both mist and snow,
And it grew wondrous cold;
And ice mast-high came floating by,
As green as emerald.

SO says that wonder-ballad of the sea.

But over London came a gale that made the chimneys rock; and after it came ice and snow, sharp, stinging sleet, and thumping hail, with sickening winds from the gray west, sour yellow fogs, and plunging rain, till all the world was weary of the winter and the cold.

But winter could not last forever. March crept onward, and the streets of London came up out of the slush again with a glad surprise of cobblestones. The sickly mist no longer hung along the river; and sometimes upon a breezy afternoon it was pleasant and fair, the sun shone warmly on one's back, and the rusty sky grew bluer overhead. The trees in Paris Garden put out buds; the lilac-tips began to swell; there was a stirring in the roadside grass, and now and then a questing bird went by upon the wind, piping a little silver thread of song. Nick's heart grew hungry for the woods of Arden and the gathering rush of the waking water-brooks among the old dead leaves. The rain beat in at his window, but he did not care for that, and kept it open day and night; for when he wakened in the dark he loved to feel the fingers of the wind across his face.

Sometimes the moonlight through the ragged clouds came in upon the floor, and in the hurry of the wind he almost fancied he could hear the Avon, bank-full, rushing under the old mill-bridge.

Then one day there came a shower with a warm south wind, sweet and healthful and serene; and through the shower, out of the breaking clouds, a sun-gleam like a path of gold straight down to the heart of London town; and on the south wind, down that path of gold, came April.

That night the wind in the chimney fluted a glad, new tune; and when Nick looked out at his casement the free stars danced before him in the sky. And when he felt that fluting wind blow warm and cool together on his cheek, the chimneys mocked him, and the town was hideous.

It fell upon an April night, when the moon was at its full, that Master Carew had come to the Falcon Inn, on the Southwark side of the river, and had brought Nick with him for the air. Master Heywood was along, and it was very pleasant there.

The night breeze smelled of green fields, and the inn was thronged with company. The windows were bright, and the air was full of voices. Tables had been brought out into the garden and set beneath the arbor toward the riverside. The vines of the arbor were shooting forth their first pink-velvet leaves, and in the moonlight their shadows fell like lacework across the linen cloths, blurred by the glow of the lanterns hung upon the posts.

The folds in the linen marked the table-tops with squares like a checker-board, and Nick stood watching from the tap-room door, as if it were a game. Not that he cared for any game; but that watching dulled the teeth of the hunger in his heart to be out of the town and back among the hills of Warwickshire, now that the spring was there.

"What, there!—a pot of sack!" cried one gay fellow with a silver-bordered cloak. "A pot of sack?" cried out another with a feather like a rose-bush in his cap; "two pots ye mean, my buck!" "Ods-fish my skin!" bawled out a third—"ods-fish my skin! Two pots of beggarly sack on a Saturday night and a moon like this? Three pots, say I—and make it malmsey, at my cost! What, there, knave! the table full of pots—I 'll pay the score."

At that they all began to laugh and to slap one another on the back, and to pound with their fists upon the board until the pewter tankards hopped; and when the tapster's knave came back they were singing at the top of their lungs, for the spring had gotten into their wits, and they were beside themselves with merriment.

Master Tom Heywood had a little table to himself off in a corner, and was writing busily upon a new play. "A sheet a day," said he, "doth do a wonder in a year"; so he was always at it.

Gaston Carew sat beyond, dicing with a silky rogue who had the coldest, hardest face that Nick had ever seen. His eyes were black and beady as a rat's, and were circled about by a myriad of little crowfoot lines; and his hooked nose lay across his thin blue lips like a finger across a slit in a dried pie. His long, slim hands were white as any woman's; and his fingers slipped among the laces at his cuffs like a weasel in a tangle-patch.

They had been playing for an hour, and the game had gone beyond all reason. The other players had put aside the dice to watch the two, and the nook in which their table stood was ringed with curious faces. A lantern had been hung above, but Carew had had it taken down, as its bottom made a shadow on the board. Carew's face was red and white by turns; but the face of the other had no more color than candle-wax.

At the end of the arbor some one was strumming upon a gittern. It was strung in a different key from that in which the men were singing, and the jangle made Nick feel all puckered up inside. By and by the playing ceased, and the singers came to the end of their song. In the brief hush the sharp rattle of the dice sounded like the patter of cold hail against the shutter in the lull of a winter storm.

Then there came a great shouting outside, and, looking through the arbor, Nick saw two couriers on galloway nags come galloping over the bowling-green to the arbor-side, calling for ale. They drank it in their saddles, while their panting horses sniffed at the fresh young grass. Then they galloped on. Through the vines, as he looked after them, Nick could see the towers of London glittering strangely in the moonlight. It was nearly high tide, and up from the river came the sound of women's voices and laughter, with the pulse-like throb of oars and the hoarse calling of the watermen.

In the great room of the inn behind him the gallants were taking their snuff in little silver ladles, and talking of princesses they had met, and of whose coach they had ridden home in last from tennis at my lord's. Some were eating, some were drinking, and some were puffing at long clay pipes, while others, by twos, locked arm in arm, went swaggering up and down the room, with a huge talking of foreign lands which they had never so much as seen.

"A murrain on the luck!" cried Carew, suddenly. "Can I throw nothing but threes and fours?"

A muffled stir ran round. Nick turned from the glare of the open door, and looked out into the moonlight. It seemed quite dark at first. The master-player's face was bitter white, and his fingers were tapping a queer staccato upon the table-top.

"A plague on the bedlam dice!" said he. "I think they are bewitched."

"Huff, ruff, and snuff!" the other replied. "Don't get the mubble-fubbles, Carew; there 's nought the matter with the dice."

A man came down from the tap-room door. Nick stepped aside to let him pass. He was a player, by his air.

He wore a riding-cloak of Holland cloth, neither so good nor so bad as a riding-cloak might be, but under it a handsome jerkin overlaid with lace, and belted with a buff girdle in which was a light Spanish rapier. His boots were russet cordovan, mid-thigh tall, and the rowels of his clinking spurs were silver stars. He was large of frame, and his curly hair was short and brown; so was his pointed beard. His eyes were singularly bright and fearless, and bluff self-satisfaction marked his stride; but his under lip was petulant, and he flicked his boot with his riding-whip as he shouldered his way along.

"Ye cannot miss the place, sir," called the tapster after him. "'T is just beyond Ned Alleyn's, by the ditch. Ye 'll never mistake the ditch, sir—Billingsgate is roses to it."

"Oh, I 'll find it fast enough," the stranger answered; "but he should have sent to meet me, knowing I might come at any hour. 'T is a felon place for thieves; and I 've not heart to skewer even a goose on such a night as this."

At the sudden breaking of voices upon the silence, Carew looked up, with a quarrel ripe for picking in his eye. But seeing who spoke, such a smile came rippling from the corners of his mouth across his dark, unhappy face that it was as if a lamp of welcome had been lighted there. "What, Ben!" he cried; "thou here? Why, bless thine heart, old gossip, 't is good to see an honest face amid this pack of rogues."

There was a surly muttering in the crowd. Carew threw his head back haughtily and set his knuckles to his hip. "A pack of rogues, I say," he repeated sharply; "and a fig for the whole pack!" There was a certain wildness in his eyes. No one stirred or made reply.

"Good! Gaston," laughed the stranger, with a shrug; "picking thy company still, I see, for quantity, and not for quality. No, thank 'e; none of the tap for me. My Lord Hunsdon was made chamberlain in his father's stead to-day, and I 'm off hot-foot with the news to Will's."

He gathered his cloak about him, and was gone.

"Ye 've lost," said the man who was dicing with Carew.

Nick stepped down from the tap-room door. His ears were tingling with the sound: "I 'm off hot-foot with the news to Will's."

"Hot-foot with the news to Will's"?

To "Will's"? "Will" who?

The man was a player, by his air.

Nick hurriedly looked around. Carew's wild eyes were frozen upon the dice. The bandy-legged man was drinking at a table near the door. The crimson ribbon in his ear looked like a patch of blood.

He saw Nick looking at him, and made a horrible face. He would have sworn likewise, but there was half a quart of ale in his can; so he turned it up and drank instead. It was a long, long drink, and half his face was buried in the pot.

When he put it down the boy was gone.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE

IN a garden near the old bear-yard, among tall rose-trees which would soon be in bloom, a merry company of men were sitting around a table which stood in the angle of a quick-set hedge beside a path graveled with white stones and bordered with mussel-shells.

There was a house hard by with creamy-white walls, green-shuttered windows, and a red-tiled roof. The door of the house was open, showing a little ruddy fire upon a great hearth, kindled to drive away the damp; and in the windows facing the garden there were lights shining warmly out among the rose-trees.

The table was spread with a red damask cloth, on which were a tray of raisins and nuts and a small rally of silver cups. Above the table an apple-tree nodded its new leaves, and from an overhanging bough a lantern hung glowing like a great yellow bee.

There was a young fellow with a white apron and a jolly little whisper of a whistle on his puckered lips going around with a plate of cakes and a tray of honey-bowls;

and the men were eating and drinking and chatting together so gaily, and seemed to be all such good friends, that it was a pleasant thing just to see them sitting there in their comfortable leather-bottomed chairs, taking life easily because the spring had come again.

One tall fellow was smoking a pipe. He held the bowl in one hand, and kept tamping down the loose tobacco with his forefinger. Now and again he would be so eagerly talking he would forget that his finger was in the bowl, and it would be burned. He would take it out with a look of quaint surprise, whereat the rest all roared. Another was a fat, round man who chuckled constantly to himself, as if this life were all a joke; and there was a quite severe, important-seeming, oldish man who said, "Hem—hem!" from time to time, as if about to speak forthwith, yet never spoke a word. There was also among the rest a raw-boned, lanky fellow who had bitten the heart out of an oat-cake and held the rim of it in his fingers like a new moon, waving it around while he talked, until the little man beside him popped it deftly out of his grasp and ate it before the other saw where it was gone. But when he made out what was become of that oat-cake he rose up solemnly, took the little man by the collar as a huntsman takes a pup, and laid him softly in the grass without a word.

What a laughing and going-on was then! It was as if they all were growing young again. And in the middle of the row a head popped over the quick-set hedge, and a most stentorian voice called out, "Here, here! Go slow—I want a piece of that!"

They all looked up, and the moment they spied that laughing face and cloak of Holland cloth, raised a shout of "What, there!" "Well met!" "Come in, Ben." "Where hast thou tarried so long?" and the like; while the waiter ran to open the gate and let the stranger in.

A quiet man with a little chestnut-colored beard and hazel eyes, which lit up quickly at sight of the stranger over the hedge, arose from his place by the table and went down the path with hands outstretched to greet him.

"Welcome, welcome, hurly-burly Ben," said he. "We've missed thee from the feast. Art well? And what's the good word?"

"Ah, Will, thou gentle rogue!" the other cried, catching the hands of the quiet man and holding him off while he looked at him there. "How thou stealest one's heart with the glance of thine eye! I was going to give thee a piece of my mind; but a plague, old heart! who could chide thee to thy face? Am I well? Ay, exceedingly well. And the news? Jove! the best that was baked at the Queen's to-day, and straight from the oven-door! The thing is done—huff, puff, and away we go! But come on—this needs telling to the rest."

They came up the path together, the big man crunching the mussel-shells beneath his sturdy tread, and so into the circle of yellow light that came down from the lantern among the apple-leaves, the big man with his arm around the quiet man's shoulders, holding his hand; for the quiet man was not so large as the other, although withal no little man himself, and very well built and straight.

His tabard was black, without sleeves, and his doublet was scarlet silk. His collar and wrist-bands were white Holland linen turned loosely back, and his face was frank and fair and free. He was not old, but his hair was thin upon his brow. His nose and his full, high forehead were as cleanly cut as a finely chiseled stone; and his sensitive mouth had a curve that was tender and sad, though he smiled all the while, a glimpse of his white teeth showing through, and his little mustache twitching with the ripple of his long upper lip. His flowing hair was chestnut-colored, like his beard, and curly at the ends; and his melancholy eyelids told of study and of thought; but under them the kindly eyes were bright with pleasant fancy.

"What, there, all of you!" said he; "a good investment for your ears!"

"Out with it, Will!" they cried, and whirled around.

"The Queen hath made Lord Hunsdon chamberlain," the big man said.

An instant's hush fell on the garden. No one spoke; but they caught each other by the hand, and, suddenly, the silence there seemed somehow louder than a shout.

"We 'll build the new Globe play-house, lads, and sweep the Bankside clean from end to end!" a sturdy voice broke sharply on the hush. And then they cheered—a cheer so loud that people on the river stopped their boats, and came ashore asking where the fire was. And over all the cheering rose the big man's voice; for the quiet man was silent, and the big man cheered for two.

"Pull up thy rose-bushes, Will," cried one, "and set out laurels in their stead—thou 'lt need them all for crowns."

"Ay, Will, our savor is not gone—Queen Bess knows salt!"

"With Will and Ben for meat and crust, and the rest of us for seasoning, the court shall say it never ate such master pie!"

"We 'll make the walls of Whitehall ring come New Year next, or Twelfth Night and Shrove Tuesday."

"Ay, that we will, old gossip! Here 's to thee!"

"Here 's to the company, all of us!"

"And a health to the new Lord Chamberlain!"

"God save the Queen!"

With that, they shook each other's hands, as merry as men could be, and laughed, because their hearts ran short of words; for these were young Lord Hunsdon's men, late players to the Queen in the old Lord Chamberlain's troupe; who, for a while deprived of favor by *his* death, were now, by this succession of his son, restored to prestige at the court, and such preferment as none beside them ever won, not even the Earl of Pembroke's company.

There was Kemp, the stout tragedian; gray John Lowin, the walking-man; Diccon Burbage, and Cuthbert his brother, master-players and managers; Robin Armin, the humorsome jester; droll Dick Tarlton, the king of fools. There was Blount, and Pope, and Hemynge, and Thomas Greene, and Joey Taylor, the acting-boy, deep in the heart of a honey-bowl, yet who one day was to play "Hamlet" as no man ever has played it since. And there were others, whose names and doings have vanished with them; and beside these—"What, merry hearts!" the big man cried, and clapped his neighbor on the back; "we 'll have a supper at the Mermaid Inn. We 'll feast on reason, reason on the feast, toast the company with wit, and company the wit with toast—why, pshaw, we are good fellows all!" He laughed, and they laughed with him. *That* was "rare Ben Jonson's" way.

"There 's some one knocking, master," said the boy.

A quick tap-tapping rattled on the wicket-gate.

"Who is it?" asked the quiet man.

"'T is Edmund with the news," cried one.

"I 've dished him," said Ben Jonson.

"'T is Condell come to raise our wages," said Robin Armin, with a grin.

"Thou 'lt raise more hopes than wages, Rob," said Tarlton, mockingly.

"It is a boy," the waiter said, "who saith that he must see thee, master, on his life."

The quiet man arose.

"Sit down, Will," said Greene; "he 'll pick thy pocket with a doleful lie."

"There 's nothing in it, Tom, to pick."

"Then give him no more than half," said Armin, soberly, "lest he squander it!"

"He saith he comes from Stratford town," the boy went on.

"Then tell him to go back again," said Master Ben Jonson; "we 've sucked the sweet from Stratford town—be off with his seedy dregs!"

"Go bring him in," said the quiet man.

"Nay, Will, don't have him in. This makes the third within the month—wilt father all the strays from Stratford town? Here, Ned, give him this shilling, and tell him to be off to his cony-burrow as fast as his legs can trot."

"We 'll see him first," said the quiet man, stopping the other's shilling with his hand.

"Oh, Willy-nilly!" the big man cried; "wilt be a kite to float all the draggle-tails that flutter down from Warwickshire?"

"Why, Ben," replied the quiet man, "'t is not the kite that floats the tail, but the wind which floats both kite and tail. Thank God, we 've caught the rising wind; so, hey for draggle-tails!—we 'll take up all we can."

The waiter was coming up the path, and by his side, a little back, bareheaded and flushed with running, came Nicholas Attwood. He had followed the big man through the fields from the gates of the Falcon Inn.

He stopped at the edge of the lantern's glow and looked around uncertain, for the light was in his eyes.

"Come, boy, what is it?" asked Ben Jonson.

Nick peered through the brightness. "Master Will—Master Will Shakspere!" he gasped.

"*Well, my lad,*" said the quiet man; "*what wilt thou have of me?*"

Nick Attwood had come to his fellow-townsman at last.

Over the hedge where the lantern shone through the green of the apple-leaves came a sound of voices talking fast, a listening hush, then a clapping of hands, with mingled cries of "Good boy!" "Right, lad; do not leave her till thou must!" and at the last, "What! take thee home to thy mother, lad? Ay, marry, that will I!" And the *last* was the voice of the quiet man.

Then followed laughter and scraps of song, merry talking, and good cheer, for they all made glad together.

Across the fields beyond the hedge the pathway ran through Paris Garden, stark and clear in the white moonshine, save here and there where the fog from the marsh crept down to meet the river-mist, and blotted out the landscape as it went. In the north lay London, stirring like a troubled sea. In the south was drowsy silence, save for the crowing of the cocks, and now and then the baying of a hound far off. The smell of bears was on the air; the river-wind breathed kennels. The Swan playhouse stood up, a great, blue blank against the sky. The sound of voices was remote. The river made a constant murmur in the murk beyond the landing-place; the trees moved softly.

Low in the west, the lights of the Falcon Inn were shrunk to pin-pricks in the dark. They seemed to wink and to shut their eyes. It was too far to see the people passing by.

On a sudden one light winked and did not open any more; and through the night a faint, far cry came drifting down the river-wind—a long, thin cry, like the wavering screech of an owl—a shrill, high, ugly sound; the lights began to wink, wink, wink, to dance, to shift, to gather into one red star. Out of the darkness came a wisp of something moving in the path.

Where the moonlight lay it scudded like the shadow of a windy cloud, now lost to sight, now seen again. Out of the shadow came a man, with hands outstretched and cap awry, running as if he were mad. As he ran he looked from side to side, and turned his head for the keener ear. He was panting hard.

When he reached the ditch he paused in fault, ran on a step or two, went back, stood hesitating there, clenching his hands in the empty wind, listening; for the mist was grown so thick that he could scarcely see.

But as he stood there doubtfully, uncertain of the way, catching the wind in his nervous hands, and turning about in a little space like an animal in a cage, over the hedge through the apple-boughs a boy's clear voice rose suddenly, singing a rollicking tune, with a snapping of fingers and tapping of feet in time to its merry lilt.

Then the man in the mist, when he heard that clear, high voice, turned swiftly to it, crying out, "The Skylark! Zooks! It is the place!" and ran through the fog to where the lantern glimmered through the hedge. The light fell in a yellow stream across his face. He was pale as a ghost. "What, there, within! What, there!" he panted. "Shakspere! Jonson! Any one!"

The song stopped short.

"Who 's there?" called the voice of the quiet man.

"'T is I, Tom Heywood. There 's to-do for players at the Falcon Inn. Gaston Carew hath stabbed Fulk Sandells, for cheating at the dice, as dead as a door-nail, and hath been taken by the watch!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST OF GASTON CAREW

IT was Monday morning, and a beautiful day.

Master Will Shakspere was reading a new play to Masters Ben Jonson and Diccon Burbage at the Mermaid Inn.

Thomas Pope, the player, and Peter Hemynge, the manager, were there with them at the table under the little window. The play was a comedy of a wicked money-lender named Shylock; but it was a comedy that made Nick shudder as he sat on the bench by the door and listened to it through happy thoughts of going home.

Sunday had passed like a wondrous dream. He was free. Master Carew was done for. On Saturday morning Master Will Shakspere would set out on the journey to Stratford town, for his regular summer visit there; and Nick was going with him—going to Stratford—going home!

The comedy-reading went on. Master Burbage, his moving face alive, leaned forward on his elbows, nodding now and then, and saying, "Fine, fine!" under his breath.

Master Pope was making faces suited to the words, not knowing that he did so. Nick watched him, fascinated.

A man came hurrying down Cheapside, and peered in at the open door. It was Master Dick Jones of the Admiral's company. He looked worried and as if he had not slept. His hair was uncombed, and the skin under his eyes hung in little bags. He squinted so that he might see from the broad daylight outside into the darker room.

"Gaston Carew wants to see thee, Skylark," said he, quickly, seeing Nick beside the door.

Nick drew back. It seemed as if the master-player must be lying in wait outside to catch him if he stirred abroad.

"He says that he must see thee without fail, and that straightway. He is in Newgate prison. Wilt come?"

Nick shook his head.

"But he says indeed he *must* see thee. Come, Skylark, I will bring thee back. I am no kidnapper. Why, it is the last thing he will ever ask of thee. 'T is hard to refuse so small a favor to a doomed man."

"Thou 'lt surely fetch me back?"

"Here, Master Will Shakspere," called the Admiral's player; "I am to fetch the boy to Carew in Newgate on an urgent matter. My name is Jones—Dick Jones, of Henslowe's company. Burbage knows me. I 'll bring him back."

Master Shakspere nodded, reading on; and Burbage waved his hand, impatient of interruption. Nick arose and went with Jones.

As they came up Newgate street to the crossing of Giltspur and the Old Bailey, the black arch of the ancient gate loomed grimly against the sky, its squinting window-slits peering down like the eyes of an old ogre. The bell of St. Sepulchre's was tolling, and there was a crowd about the door, which opened, letting out a black cart in which was a priest praying and a man in irons going to be hanged on Tyburn Hill. His sweating face was ashen gray; and when the cart came to the church door they gave him mockingly a great bunch of fresh, bright flowers. Nick could not bear to watch.

The turnkey at the prison gate was a crop-headed fellow with jowls like a bulldog, and no more mercy in his face than a chopping-block. "Gaston Carew, the player?" he growled. "Ye can't come in without a permit from the warden."

"We must," said Jones.

"Must?" said the turnkey. "I am the only one who says 'must' in Newgate!" and slammed the door in their faces.

The player clinked a shilling on the bar.

"It was a boy he said would come," growled the turnkey through the wicket, pocketing the shilling; "so just the boy goes up. A shilling's worth, ye mind, and not another wink." He drew Nick in, and dropped the bars.

It was a foul, dark place, and full of evil smells. Drops of water stood on the cold stone walls, and a green mould crept along the floor. The air was heavy and dank, and it began to be hard for Nick to breathe. The men in the dungeons were singing a horrible song, and in the corner was a half-naked fellow shackled to the floor. "Give me a penny," he said, "or I will curse thee." Nick shuddered.

"Up with thee," said the turnkey, gruffly, unlocking the door to the stairs.

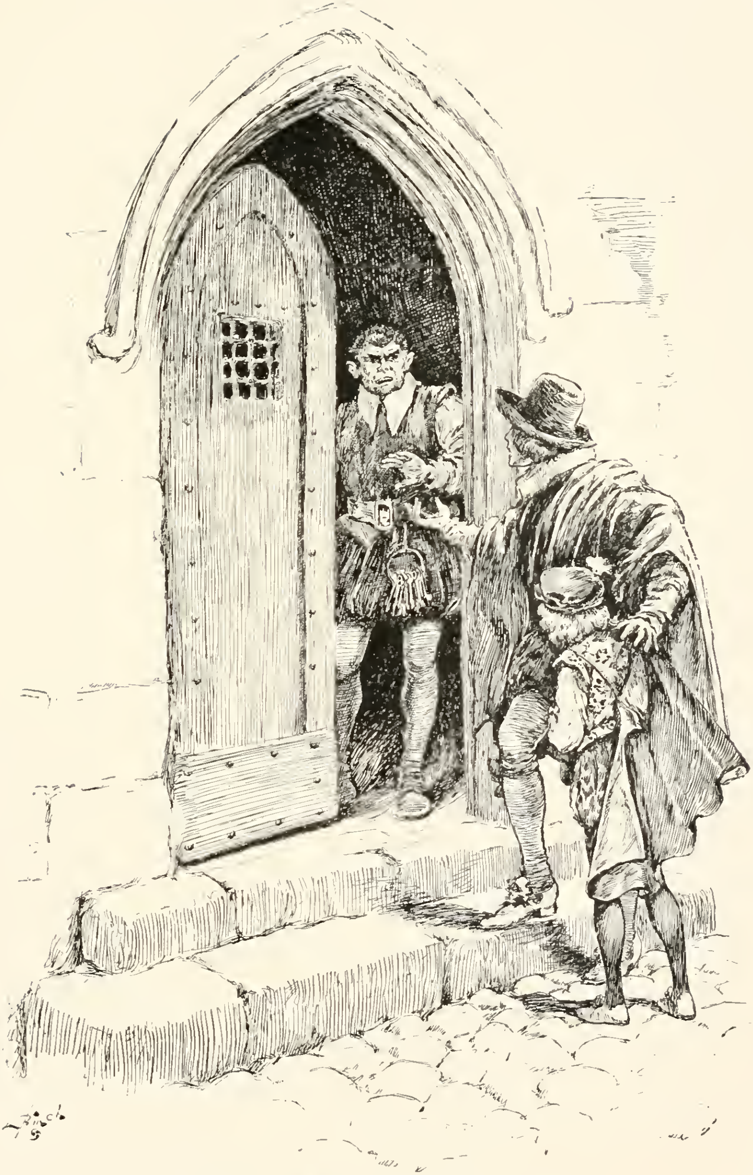
The common room above was packed with miserable wretches, fighting, dancing, gibbering like apes. Some were bawling ribald songs, others moaning with fever. The strongest kept the window-ledges near light and air by sheer main force, and were dicing on the dirty sill. The turnkey pushed and banged his way through them, Nick clinging desperately to his jerkin.

In a cell at the end of the corridor there was a Spanish renegade who cursed the light when the door was opened, and cursed the darkness when it closed. "Cesare el Moro, Cesare el Moro," he was saying over and over again to himself, as if he feared that he might forget his own name.

Carew was in the middle cell, ironed hand and foot. He had torn his sleeves and tucked the lace under the rough edges of the metal to keep it from chafing the skin. He sat on a pile of dirty straw, with his face in his folded arms upon his knees. By his side was a broken biscuit and an empty stone jug. He had his fingers in his ears to shut out the tolling of the knell for the man who had gone to be hanged.

The turnkey shook the bars. "Here, wake up!" he said.

Carew looked up. His eyes were swollen, and his face was covered with a two days' beard. He had slept in his clothes, and they were full of broken straw and creases.



"YE CAN'T COME IN WITHOUT A PERMIT."

But his haggard face lit up when he saw the boy, and he came to the grating with an eager exclamation: "And thou hast truly come? To the man thou dost hate so bitterly, but wilt not hate any more. Come, Nick, thou wilt not hate me any more. 'T will not be worth thy while, Nick; the night is coming fast."

"Why, sir," said Nick, "it is not so dark outside—'t is scarcely noon; and thou wilt soon be out."

"Out? Ay, on Tyburn Hill," said the master-player, quietly. "I 've spent my whole life for a bit of hempen cord. I 've taken my last cue. Last night, at twelve o'clock, I heard the bellman under the prison walls call my name with the names of those already condemned. The play is nearly out, Nick, and the people will be going home. It has been a wild play, Nick, and ill played."

"Here, if ye 've anything to say, be saying it," said the turnkey. "'T is a shilling's worth, ye mind."

Carew lifted up his head in the old haughty way, and clapped his shackled hand to his hip—they had taken his poniard when he came into the gaol. A queer look came over his face; taking his hand away, he wiped it hurriedly upon his jerkin. There were dark stains upon the silk.

"Ye sent for me, sir," said Nick.

Carew passed his hand across his brow. "Yes, yes, I sent for thee. I have something to tell thee, Nick." He hesitated, and looked through the bars at the boy, as if to read his thoughts. "Thou 'lt be good and true to Cicely—thou 'lt deal fairly with my girl? Why, surely, yes."

He paused again, as if irresolute. "I 'll trust thee, Nick. We 've taken money, thou and I; good gold and silver—tsst! what 's that?" He stopped suddenly.

Nick heard no sound but the Spaniard's cursing.

"'T is my fancy," Carew said. "Well, then, we 've taken much good money, Nick; and I have not squandered all of it. Hark 'e—thou knowest the old oak wainscot in the dining-hall, and the carven panel by the Spanish chest? Good, then! Upon the panel is a cherubin, and—tsst! what 's that, I say?"

There was a stealthy rustling in the right-hand cell. The fellow in it had his ear pressed close against the bars. "He is listening," said Nick.

The fellow cursed and shook his fist, and then, when Master Carew dropped his voice and would have gone on whispering, set up so loud a howling and clanking of his chains that the lad could not make out one word the master-player said.

"Peace, thou dog!" cried Carew, and kicked the grating. But the fellow only yelled the louder.

Carew looked sorely troubled. "I dare not let him hear," said he. "The very walls of Newgate leak."

"*Yah, yah, yah, thou gallows-bird!*"

"Yet I must tell thee, Nick."

"*Yah, yah, dangle-rope!*"

"Stay! would Will Shakspere come? Why, here, I 'll send him word. He 'll come—Will Shakspere never bore a grudge; and I shall so soon go where are no grudges, envy, storms, or noise, but silence and the soft lap of everlasting sleep. He 'll come—Nick, bid him come, upon his life, to the Old Bailey when I am taken up."

Nick nodded. It was strange to have his master beg.

Carew was looking up at a thin streak of light that came in through the narrow window at the stair. "Nick," said he, huskily, "last night I dreamed I heard thee singing; but 't was where there was a sweet, green field and a stream flowing through a little wood. Methought 't was on the road past Warwick toward Coventry. Thou 'lt go there some day and remember Gaston Carew, wilt not, lad? And, Nick, for thine own mother's sake, do not altogether hate him; he was not so bad a man as he might easily have been."

"Come," growled the turnkey, who was pacing up and down like a surly bear; "have done. 'T is a fat shilling's worth."

"'T was there I heard thee sing first, Nick," said Carew, holding to the boy's hands through the bars. "I 'll never hear thee sing again."

"Why, sir, I 'll sing for thee now," said Nick, choking.

The turnkey was coming back when Nick began suddenly to sing. He looked up, staring. Such a thing dumfounded him. He had never heard a song like that in Newgate. There were rules in prison. "Here, here," he cried, "be still!" But Nick sang on.

The groaning, quarreling, and cursing were silent all at once. The guard outside, who had been sharpening his pike upon the window-ledge, stopped the shrieking sound. Silence like a restful sleep fell upon the weary place.

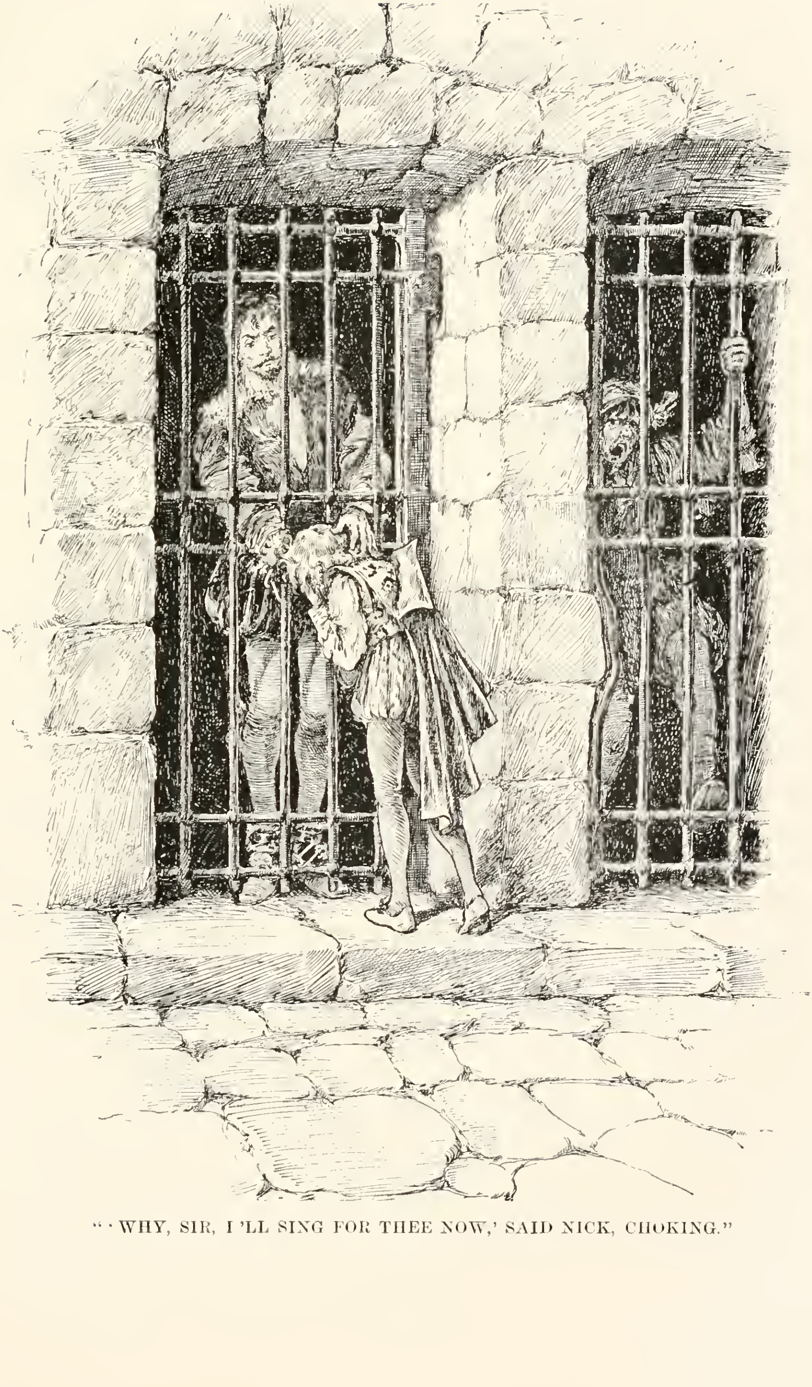
Through dark corridors and down the mildewed stairs the quaint old song went floating as a childhood memory into an old man's dream; and to Gaston Carew's ear it seemed as if the melody of earth had all been gathered in that little song—all but the sound of the voice of his daughter Cicely.

It ceased, and yet a gentle murmur seemed to steal through the mouldy walls, of birds and flowers, sunlight and the open air, of once-loved mothers, and of long-forgotten homes. The renegade had ceased his cursing, and was whispering a fragment of a Spanish prayer he had not heard for many a day.

Carew muttered to himself. "And now old cares are locked in charmèd sleep, and new griefs lose their bitterness, to hear thee sing—to hear thee sing. God bless thee, Nick!"

"'T is three good shillings' worth o' time," the turnkey growled, and fumbled with the keys. "All for one shilling, too," said he, and kicked the door-post sulkily. "But a plague, I say, a plague! 'T is no one's business but mine. I 've a good two shillings' worth in my ears. 'T is thirty year since I ha' heard the like o' that. But what 's a gaol for?—man's delight? Nay, nay. Here, boy, time 's up! Come out o' that." But he spoke so low that he scarcely heard himself; and going to the end of the corridor, he marked at random upon the wall.

"Oh, Nick, I love thee," said the master-player, holding the boy's hands with a bitter grip. "Dost thou not love me just a little? Come, lad, say that thou lovest me."



"'WHY, SIR, I 'LL SING FOR THEE NOW,' SAID NICK, CHOKING."

"Nay, Master Carew," Nick answered soberly, "I do na love thee, and I will na say I do, sir; but I pity thee with all my heart. And, sir, if thy being out would keep me stolen, still I think I 'd wish thee out—for Cicely. But, Master Carew, do na break my hands."

The master-player loosed his grasp. "I will not seek to be excused to thee," he said huskily. "I've prisoned thee as that clod prisons me; but, Nick, the play is almost out, down comes the curtain on my heels, and thy just blame will find no mark. Yet, Nick, now that I am fast and thou art free, it makes my heart ache to feel that 't was not I who set thee free. Thou canst go when pleaseth thee, and thank me nothing for it. And, Nick, as my sins be forgiven me, I truly meant to set thee free and send thee home. I did, upon my word, and on the remnant of mine honour!"

"Time 's good and up, sirs," said the turnkey, coming back.

Carew thrust his hand into his breast.

"I must be going, sir," said Nick.

"Ay, so thou must—all things must go. Oh, Nick, be friendly with me now, if thou wert never friendly before. Kiss me, lad. There—now thy hand." The master-player clasped it closely in his own, and pressing something into the palm, shut down the fingers over it. "Quick! Keep it hid," he whispered. "'T is the chain I had from Stratford's burgesses, to some good usage come at last."

"Must I come and fetch thee out?" growled the turnkey.

"I be coming, sir."

"Thou 'lt send Will Shakspere? And, oh, Nick," cried Carew, holding him yet a little longer, "thou 'lt keep my Cicely from harm?"

"I 'll do my best," said Nick, his own eyes full.

The turnkey raised his heavy bunch of keys. "I 'll ding thee out o' this," said he.

And the last Nick Attwood saw of Gaston Carew was his wistful eyes hunting down the stairway after him, and his hand, with its torn fine laces, waving at him through the bars.

And when he came to the Mermaid Inn Master Shakspere's comedy was done, and Master Ben Jonson was telling a merry tale that made the tapster sick with laughing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CICELY DISAPPEARS

THAT Master Will Shakspere should be so great seemed passing strange to Nick, he felt so soon at home with him. It seemed as if the master-maker of plays had a magic way of going out to and about the people he met, and of fitting his humor to them as though he were a glover with their measure in his hand.

With Nick he was nothing all day long but a jolly, wise, and gentle-hearted boy, wearing his greatness like an old cloth coat, as if it were a long-accustomed thing, and quite beyond all pride, and went about his business in a very simple way. But in the evening when the wits were met together at his house, and Nick sat on the hindmost bench and watched the noble gentlemen who came to listen to the sport, Master Will Shakspere seemed to have the knack of being ever best among them all, yet of never too much seeming to be better than the rest.

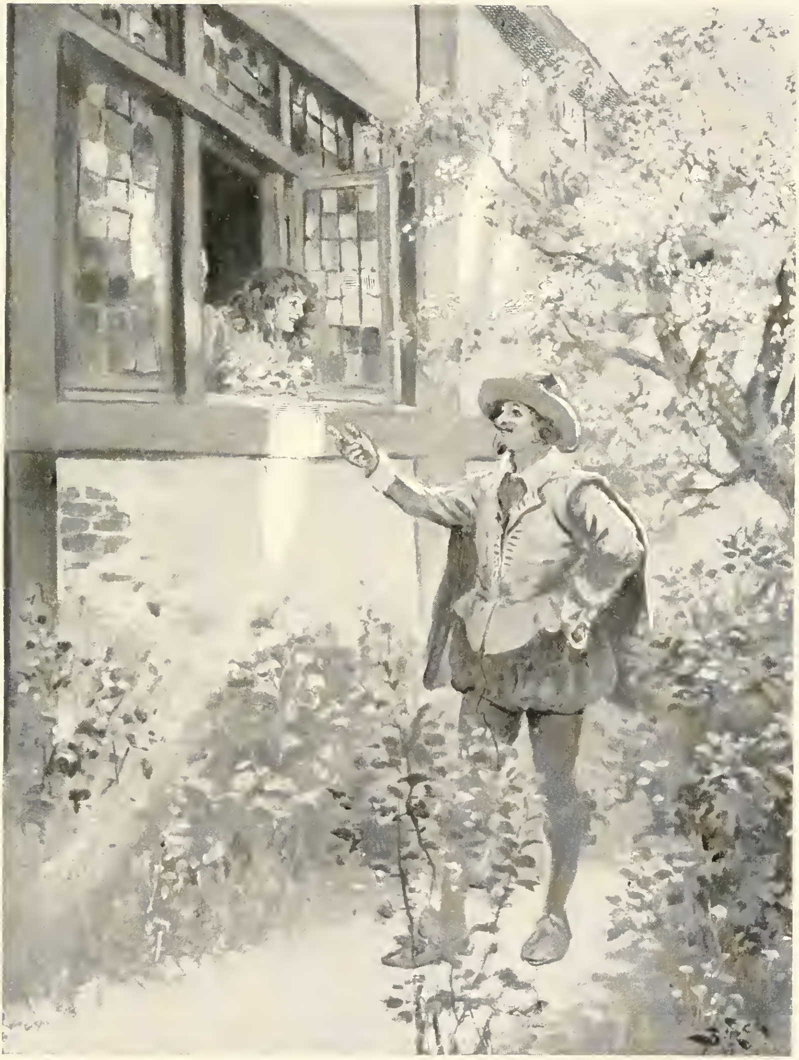
And though, for the most part, he said but little, save when some pet fancy moved him, when he did speak his conversation sparkled like a little meadow brook that drew men's best thoughts out of them like water from a spring.

And when they fell to bantering, he could turn the fag-end of another man's nothing to good account in a way so shrewd that not even Master Ben Jonson could better him —and Master Ben Jonson set up for a wit. But Master Shakspere came about as quickly as an English man-of-war, dodged here and there on a breath of wind, and seemed quite everywhere at once; while Master Jonson tacked and veered, and loomed across the elements like a great galleon, pouring forth learned broadsides with a most prodigious boom, riddling whatever was in the way, to be sure, but often quite missing the point—because Master Shakspere had come about, hey, presto, change! and was off with the argument, point and all, upon a totally different tack.

Then "Tush!" and "Fie upon thee, Will!" Master Jonson would cry with his great bluff-hearted laugh, "thou art a regular flibbertigibbet! I 'll catch thee napping yet, old heart, and fill thee so full of pepper-holes that thou wilt leak epigrams. But quits—I must be home, or I shall catch it from my wife. Faith, Will, thou shouldst see my little Ben!"

"I 'll come some day," Master Shakspere would say; "give him my love"; and his mouth would smile, though his eyes were sad, for his own son Hamnet was dead.

Then, when the house was still again, and all had said good-by, Nick doffed his clothes and laid him down to sleep in peace. Yet he often wakened in the night, because his heart was dancing so.



"'GOOD-MORROW, MASTER EARLY-BIRD!'"

In the morning, when the world began to stir outside, and the early light came in at the window, he slipped out of bed across the floor, and threw the casement wide. Over the river, and over the town, and over the hills that lay blue in the north, was Stratford!

The damp, cool air from the garden below seemed a primrose whiff from the lane behind his father's house. He could hear the cocks crowing in Surrey, and the lowing of the kine. There was a robin singing in a bush under the window, and there was some one in the garden with a pair of pruning-shears. Snip-snip! snip-snip! he heard them going. The light in the east was pink as a peach-bloom and too intense to bear.

"Good-morrow, Master Early-bird!" a merry voice called up to him, and a nosegay dropped on the window-ledge at his side. He looked down. There in the path among the rose-trees was Master Will Shakspere, laughing. He had on an ancient leathern jacket and a hat with a hole in its crown; and the skirts of the jacket were dripping with dew from the bushes.

"Good-morrow, sir," said Nick, and bowed. "It is a lovely day."

"Most beautiful indeed! How comes the sun?"

"Just up, sir; the river is afire with it now. O-oh!" Nick held his breath, and watched the light creep down the wall, darting long bars of rosy gold through the snowy bloom of the apple-trees, until it rested upon Master Shakspere's face, and made a fleeting glory there.

Then Master Shakspere stretched himself a little in the sun, laughing softly, and said, "It is the sweetest music in the world—morning, spring, and God's dear sunshine; it starteth kindness brewing in the heart, like sap in a withered bud. What sayest, lad? We 'll fetch the little maid to-day; and then—away for Stratford town!"

But when Master Shakspere and Nicholas Attwood came to Gaston Carew's house, the constables had taken charge, the servants were scattering hither and thither, and Cicely Carew was gone.

The bandy-legged man, the butler said, had come on Sunday in great haste, and packing up his goods, without a word of what had befallen his master, had gone away, no one knew whither, and had taken Cicely with him. Nor had they questioned what he did, for they all feared the rogue, and judged him to have authority.

Nick caught a moment at the lintel of the door. The house was full of voices, and the sound of trampling feet went up and down from room to room; but all he heard was Gaston Carew's worn voice saying, "Thou 'lt keep my Cicely from harm?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE BANDY-LEGGED MAN

UNTIL night fell they sought the town over for a trace of Cicely; but all to no avail. The second day likewise.

The third day passed, and still there were no tidings. Master Shakspere's face grew very grave, and Nick's heart sickened till he quite forgot that he was going home.

But on the morning of the fourth day, which chanced to be the 1st of May, as he was standing in the door of a printer's stall in St. Paul's Churchyard, watching the gaily dressed holiday crowds go up and down, while Robin Dexter's apprentices bound white-thorn boughs about the brazen serpent overhead, he spied the bandy-legged man among the rout that passed the north gate by St. Martin's le Grand.

He had a yellow ribbon in his ear, and wore a bright plum-colored cloak, at sight of which Nick cried aloud, for it was the very cloak which Master Gaston Carew wore when he first met him in the Warwick road. The rogue was making for the way which ran from Cheapside to the river, and was walking very fast.

"Master Shakspere! Master Shakspere!" Nick called out. But Master Shakspere was deep in the proofs of a newly published play, and did not hear.

The yellow ribbon fluttered in the sun—was gone behind the churchyard wall.

"Quick, Master Shakspere! quick!" Nick cried; but the master-writer frowned at the inky page; for the light in the printer's shop was dim, and the proof was very bad.

The ribbon was gone down the river-way—and with it the hope of finding Cicely. Nick shot one look into the stall. Master Shakspere, deep in his proofs, was deaf to the world outside. Nick ran to the gate at the top of his speed. In the crowd afar off a yellow spot went fluttering like a butterfly along a country road. Without a single second thought, he followed it as fast as his legs could go.

Twice he lost it in the throng. But the yellow patch bobbed up again in the sunlight far beyond, and led him on, and on, and on, a breathless chase, down empty lanes and alley-ways, through unfrequented courts, among the warehouses and wharf-sheds along the river-front, into the kennels of Billingsgate, where the only sky was a ragged slit between the leaning roofs. His heart sank low and lower as they went, for only thieves and runagates who dared not face the day in honest streets were gathered in wards like these.

In a filthy purlieu under Fish-street Hill, where mackerel-heads and herrings strewed the drains, and sour kits of whitebait stood fermenting in the sun, the bandy-legged man turned suddenly into a dingy court, and when Nick reached the corner of the entry-way was gone as though the earth had swallowed him.

Nick stopped dismayed, and looked about. His forehead was wet and his breath was gone. He had no idea where they were, but it was a dismal hole. Six forbidding doorways led off from the unkempt court, and a rotting stairway sagged along the wall. A crop-eared dog, that lay in the sun beside a broken cart, sprang up with its hair all pointing to its head, and snarled at him with a vicious grin. "Begone, thou cur!" he cried, and let drive with a stone. The dog ran under the cart, and crouched there barking at him.

Through an open door beyond there came a sound of voices as of people in some further thoroughfare. Perchance the bandy-legged man had passed that way? He ran across the court, and up the steps; but came back faster than he went, for the passageway there was blind and black, a place unspeakable for dirt, and filled with people past description. A woman peered out after him with red eyes blinking in the sun. "Ods bobs!" she croaked, "a pretty thing! Come hither, knave; I want the buckle off thy cloak."

Nick, shuddering, started for the street. But just as he reached the entry-port a door in the courtyard opened, and the bandy-legged man came out with a bag upon his back, leading Cicely by the hand.

Seeing Nick, he gave a cry, believing himself pursued, and made for the open door again; but almost instantly perceiving the boy to be alone, slammed shut the door and followed him instead, dragging Cicely over the stones, and shouting hoarsely, "Stop there! stop!"

Nick's heart came up in his very throat. His legs went water-weak. He ran for the open thoroughfare without once looking back. Yet while he ran he heard Cicely cry out suddenly in pain, "Oh, Gregory, Gregory, thou art hurting me so!" and at the sound the voice of Gaston Carew rang like a bugle in his ears: "Thou 'lt keep my Cicely from harm?" He stopped as short as if he had butted his head against a wall, whirled on his heel, stood fast, though he was much afraid; and standing there, his head thrown back and his fists tight clenched, as if some one had struck him in the face, he waited until they came to where he was. "Thou hulking, cowardly rogue!" said he to the bandy-legged man.

But the bandy-legged man caught him fast by the arm, and hurried on into the street, scanning it swiftly up and down. "Two birds with one stone, by hen!" he chuckled, when he saw that the coast was clear. "They 'll fetch a pretty penny by and by."

Poor Cicely smiled through her tears at Nick. "I knew thou wouldst come for me soon," said she. "But where is my father?"

"He 's dead as a herring," snarled Gregory.

"That 's a lie," said Nick; "he is na dead."

"Don't call me liar, knave—by hen, I 'll put a stopper on thy voice!"

"Thou wilt na put a stopper on a jug!" cried Nick, his heart so hot for Cicely that he quite forgot himself. "I 'd sing so well without a voice—it would butter thy bread for thee! Loose my arm, thou rogue."

"Not for a thousand golden crowns! I 'm no tomnoddy, to be gulled. And, hark 'e, be less glib with that 'rogue' of thine, or I 'll baste thy back for thee."

"Oh, don't beat Nick!" gasped Cicely.

"Do na fret for me," said Nick; "I be na feared of the cowardly rogue!"

Crack! the man struck him across the face. Nick's eyes flashed hot as a fire-coal. He set his teeth, but he did not flinch. "Do na thou strike me again, *thou rogue!*" said he.

As he spoke, on a sudden his heart leaped up and his fear was utterly gone. In its place was a something fierce and strange—a bitter gladness, a joy that stung and thrilled him like great music in the night. A tingling ran from head to foot; the little hairs of his flesh stood up; he trampled the stones as he hurried on. In his breast his heart was beating like a bell; his breath came hotly, deep and slow; the whole world widened on his gaze. Oh, what a thing is the heart of a boy! how quickly great things are done therein! One instant, put him to the touch —the thing is done, and he is nevermore the same. Like a keen, cold wind that blows through a window in the night, life's courage had breathed on Nick Attwood's heart; the *man* that slept in the heart of the boy awoke and was aware. The old song roared in Nick's ears:

Sir Francis Drake sailed round the world,
Round the world, round the world;
John Hawkins fought the "Victory,"
And we ha' beaten Spain!

Whither they were going he did not know. Whither they were going he did not care. He was English: this was England still! He set his teeth and threw back his shoulders. "I be na feared of him!" said he.

"But my father will come for us soon, won't he, Nick?" faltered Cicely.

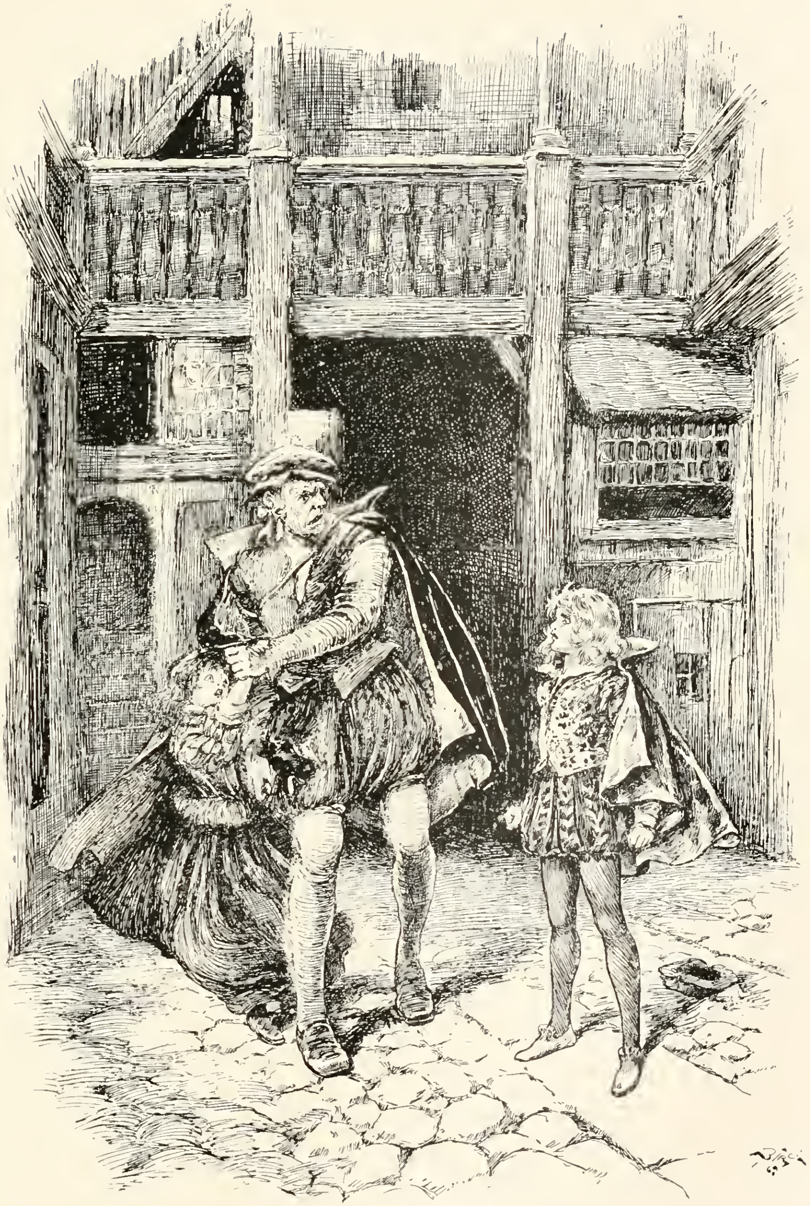
"Eigh! just don't he wish that he might!" laughed Goole.

"Oh, ay," said she, and nodded bravely to herself; "he may be very busy now, and so he cannot come. But presently he will come for me and fetch me home again." She gave a joyous little skip. "To fetch me home again—ay, surely, my father will come for me anon."

A lump came up in Nick Attwood's throat. "But what hath he done to thee, Cicely, and where is thy pretty gown?" he asked, as they hurried on through the crooked way; for the gown she wore was in rags.

Cicely choked down a sob. "He hath kept me locked up in a horrible place, where an old witch came in the night and stole my clothes away. And he says that if money doth not come for me soon he will turn me out to starve."

"To starve? Nay, Cicely; I will na leave thee starve. I 'll go with thee wherever he taketh thee; I 'll fend for thee with all my might and main, and none shall harm



“‘DO NA THOU STRIKE ME AGAIN, *THOU ROGUE!*’ SAID NICK.”

thee if I can help. So cheer up—we will get away! Thou needst na gripe me so, thou rogue; I am going wherever she goes."

"I 'll see that ye do," growled the bandy-legged man. "But take the other hand of her, thou jackanapes, and fetch a better pace than this—I 'll not be followed again."

His tone was bold, but his eyes were not; for they were faring through the slums toward Whitechapel way, and the hungry crowd eyed Nick's silk cloak greedily. One burly rascal with a scar across his face turned back and snatched at it. For his own safety's sake, the bandy-legged man struck up into a better thoroughfare, where he skulked along like a fox overtaken by dawn, fearing to meet some dog he knew.

"Oh, Gregory, go slow!" pleaded Cicely, panting for breath, and stumbling over the cobblestones. Goole's only answer was a scowl. Nick trotted on sturdily, holding her hand, and butting his shoulder against the crowd so that she might not be jostled; for the press grew thick and thicker as they went. All London was a-Maying, and the foreigners from Soho, too. Up in the belfries, as they passed, the bells were clanging until the whole town rang like a smithy on the eve of war, for madcap apprentices had the ropes, and were ringing for exercise.

Thicker and thicker grew the throng, as though the sea were sweeping through the town. Then, at the corner of Mincing Lane, where the cloth-workers' shops were thick, all at once there came an uproarious din of men's voices singing together:

"Three merry boys, and three merry boys,
And three merry boys are we,
As ever did sing in a hempen string
Beneath the gallows-tree!"

And before the bandy-legged man could chance upon a doorway in which to stand out of the rush, they were pressed against the wall flat as cakes by a crowd of bold apprentices in holiday attire going out to a wager of archery to be shot in Finsbury Fields.

At first all Nick could see was legs: red legs, yellow legs, blue legs, green legs, long legs, strong legs—in truth, a very many of all sorts of legs, all stepping out together like a hundred-bladed shears; for these were the Saddlers of Cheapside and the Cutters of Mincing Lane, tall, ruddy-faced fellows, all armed with clubs, which they twirled and tossed and thwacked one another with in sport. Some wore straw hats with steeple-crowns, and some flat caps of green and white, or red and orange-tawny. Some had long yew bows and sheaves of arrows decked with garlands; and they were all exceedingly daubed in the face with dripping cherry-juice and with cheese, which they munched as they strode along.

"What, there, Tom Webster, I say," cried one, catching sight of Cicely's face, "here is a Queen o' the May for thee!"

His broad-shouldered comrade stopped in the way, and with him all the rest. "My faith, Jem Armstrong, 't is the truth, for once in thy life!" quoth he, and stared at Cicely. Her cheeks were flushed, and her panting red lips were fallen apart so that her little white teeth showed through. Her long, dark lashes cast shadow circles under her eyes. Her curly hair in elfin locks tossed all about her face, and through it was tied a crimson ribbon, mocking the quick color of the blood which came and went beneath her delicate skin. "My faith!" cried Tommy Webster, "her face be as fair as a K in a copy-book! Hey, bullies, what? let 's make her queen!"

"A queen?" "What queen?" "Where is a queen?" "I granny! Tom Webster hath catched a queen!" "Where is she, Tom?" "Up with her, mate, and let a fellow see."

"Hands off, there!" snarled the bandy-legged man.

"Up with her, Tom!" cried out the strapping fellow at his back. "A queen it is; and a right good smacking toll all round—I have not bussed a maid this day! Up with her, Tom!"

"Stand back, ye rogues, and let us pass!"

But alas and alack for the bandy-legged man! He could not ruffle and swagger it off as Gaston Carew had done of old; a London apprentice was harder nuts than his cowardly heart could crack.

"Stand back, ye rogues!" he cried again.

"Rogues? Rogues? Who calls us rogues? Hi, Martin Allston, crack me his crown!"

"Good masters," faltered Gregory, seeing that bluster would not serve, "I meant ye no offense. I pr'ythee, do not keep a father and his children from their dying mother's bed!"

"Nay—is that so?" asked Webster, sobering instantly. "Here, lads, give way—their mother be a-dying."

The crowd fell back. "Ah, sirs," whined Goole, scarce hiding the joy in his face, "she 'll thank ye with her dying breath. Get on, thou knave!" he muttered fiercely in Nick's ear.

But Nick stood fast, and caught Tom Webster by the arm. "The fellow lieth in his throat," said he. "My mother is in Stratford town; and Cicely's mother is dead."

"Thou whelp!" cried the bandy-legged man, and aimed a sudden blow at Nick, "I 'll teach thee to hold thy tongue."

"Oh, no, ye won't," quoth Thomas Webster, interposing his long oak staff, and thrusting the fellow away so hard that he thumped against the wall; "there is no school on holidays! Thou 'lt teach nobody here to hold his tongue but thine own self—and start at that straightway. Dost take me?—say? Now, Jacky Sprat, what 's all the coil about? Hath this sweet fellow kidnapped thee?"

"Nay, sir, not me, but Cicely; and do na leave him take her, sir, for he treats her very ill!"

"The little rascal lies," sneered Goole, though his lips were the color of lead; "I am her legal guardian!"

"What! How? Thou wast her father but a moment since!"

"Nay, nay," Goole stammered, turning a sickly hue; "her father's nearest friend, I said,—he gave her in my charge."

"My father's friend!" cried Cicely. "Thou? Thou? His common groom! Why, he would not give my finger in thy charge."

"He is the wiser daddy, then!" laughed Jemmy Armstrong, "for the fellow hath a T for Tyburn writ upon his face."

The eyes of the bandy-legged man began to shift from side to side; but still he put a bold front on. "Stand off," said he, and tried to thrust Tom Webster back. "Thou 'lt pay the piper dear for this! The knave is a lying vagabond. He hath stolen this pack of goods."

"Why, fie for shame!" cried Cicely, and stamped her little foot. "Nick doth not steal, and thou knowest it, Gregory Goole! It is thou who hast stolen my pretty clothes, and the wine from my father's house!"

"Good, sweetheart!" quoth Tom Webster, eying the bandy-legged man with a curious snap in his honest eyes. "So the rascal hath stolen other things than thee? I thought that yellow bow of his was tied tremendous high! Why, mates, the dog is a branded rogue—that ribbon is tied through the hole in his ear!"

Gregory Goole made a dash through the throng where the press was least.

Thump! went Tommy Webster's club, and a little puff of dust went up from Gregory's purple cloak. But he was off so sharply, and dodged with such amazing skill, that most of the blows aimed at his head hummed through the empty air, or thwacked some stout apprentice in the ribs as they all went whooping after him. He was out of the press and away like a deer down a covert lane between two shops ere one could say, "Jack, Robin's son," and left the stout apprentices at every flying leap. So presently they all gave over the chase, and came back with the bag he had dropped as he ran; and were so well pleased with themselves for what they had done that they gave three cheers for all the Cloth-workers and Saddlers in London, and then three more for Cicely and Nick. They would no doubt have gone right on and given three for the bag likewise, being strongly in the humor of it; but "Hi, Tom Webster!" shouted one who could hardly speak for cherries and cheese and puffing, "what 's gone with the queen we 're to have so fast, and the toll that we 're to take?"

Tom Webster pulled at his yellow beard, for he saw that Cicely was no common child, and of gentler birth than they. "I do not think she 'll bide the toll," said he, in half apology.

"What! is there anything to pay?" she asked with a rueful quaver in her voice. "Oh, Nick, there is to pay!"

"We have no money, sirs," said Nick; "I be very sorry."

"If my father were here," said Cicely, "he would give thee a handful of silver; but I have not a penny to my name." She looked up into Tom Webster's face. "But, sir," said she, and laid her hand upon his arm, "if ye care, I will kiss thee upon the cheek."

"Why, marry come up! My faith!" quoth he, and suddenly blushed—to his own surprise the most of all—

"why, what? Who 'd want a sweeter penny for his pains?" But "Here—nay, nay!" the others cried; "ye 've left us out. Fair play, fair play!"

All Cicely could see was a forest of legs that filled the lane from wall to wall, and six great fellows towering over her. "Why, sirs," cried she, confusedly, while her face grew rosy red, "ye all shall kiss my hand—if—if—"

"If what?" they roared.

"If ye will but wipe your faces clean."

At the shout of laughter they sent up the constable of the cloth-men's ward awoke from a sudden dream of war and bloody insurrection, and came down Cheapside bawling, "Peace, in the name of the Queen!" But when he found it was only the apprentices of Mincing Lane out Maying, he stole away around a shop, and made as if it were some other fellow.

They took the humor of it like a jolly lot of bears, and all came crowding round about, wiping their mouths on what came first, with a lick and a promise,—kerchief, doublet, as it chanced,—laughing, and shouldering each to be first. "Up with the little maid there, Tom!" they roared lustily.

Cicely gave him both her hands, and—"Upsydaisy!"—she was on the top of the corner post, where she stood with one hand on his brawny shoulder to steady herself, like a flower growing by a wall, bowing gravely all about, and holding out her hand to be kissed with as graceful an air as a princess born, and withal a sweet, quaint dignity that abashed the wildest there.

Some one or two came blustering as if her hand were not enough; but Jemmy Armstrong rapped them so sharply over the pate, with "Soft, ye loons, her hand!" that they dabbed at her little finger-tips, and were out of his reach in a jiffy, rubbing their polls with a sheepish grin; for Jemmy Armstrong's love-pats would have cracked a hazelnut.

Some came again a second time. One came even a third. But Cicely knew him by his steeple-hat, and tucked her hand behind her, saying, "Fie, sir, thou art greedy!" Whereupon the others laughed and punched him in the ribs with their clubs, until he bellowed, "Quits! We 'll all be late to the archery if we be not trotting on."

Nick's face fell at the merry shout of "Finsbury, Finsbury, ho!" "I dare na try to take her home alone," said he; "that rogue may lie in wait for us."

"Oh, Nick, he is not coming back?" cried Cicely; and with that she threw her arms around Tom Webster's neck. "Oh, take us with thee, sir—don't leave us all alone!"

Webster pulled his yellow beard. "Nay, lass, it would not do," said he; "we 'll be mad larks by evening. But there, sweetheart, don't weep no more! That rogue shall not catch thee again, I promise that."

"Why, Tom," quoth Armstrong, "what 's the coil? We 'll leave them at the Boar's Head Inn with sixpence each until their friends can come for them. Hey, mates, up Great East Cheap!" And off they marched to the Boar's Head Inn.

CHAPTER XXXV

A SUDDEN RESOLVE

NICK and Cicely were sitting on a bench in the sun beside the tap-room door, munching a savory mutton-pie which Tommy Webster had bought for them. Beside them over the window-sill the tapster twirled his spigot cheerfully, and in the door the carrier was bidding the serving-maids good-by.

Around the inn-yard stood a row of heavy, canvas-covered wains and lumbering two-wheeled carts, each surmounted by a well-armed guard, and drawn by six strong horses with harness stout as cannon-leathers. The hostlers stood at the horses' heads, chewing at wisps of barley-straw as though their other fare was scant, which, from their sleek rotundity, was difficult to believe. The stable-boy, with a pot of slush, and a head of hair like a last year's haycock, was hastily greasing a forgotten wheel; while, out of the room where the servants ate, the drivers came stumbling down the steps with a mighty smell of onions and brawn. The weekly train from London into the north was ready to be off.

A portly, well-clad countryman, with a shrewd but good-humored countenance, and a wife beside him round and rosy of face as he, came bustling out of the private door. "How far yet, Master John?" he asked as he buckled on his cloak. "Forty-two miles to Oxford, sir," replied the carrier. "We must be off if we 're to lie at Uxbridge overnight; for there hath been rain beyond, sir, and the roads be werry deep."

Nick stared at the man for Oxford. Forty-two miles to Oxford! And Oxford lay to the south of Stratford fifty miles and two. Ninety-four miles from Stratford town! Ninety-four miles from home!

"When will my father come for us, Nick?" asked Cicely, turning her hand in the sun to see the red along the edges of her fingers.

"Indeed, I can na tell," said Nick; "Master Will Shakspere is coming anon, and I shall go with him."

"And leave me by myself?"

"Nay; thou shalt go, too. Thou 'lt love to see his garden and the rose-trees—it is like a very country place. He is a merry gentleman, and, oh, so kind! He is going to take me home."

"But my father will take us home when he comes."

"To Stratford town, I mean."

"Away from daddy and me? Why, Nick!"

"But my mother is in Stratford town."

Cicely was silent. "Then I think I would go, too," she said quite softly, looking down as if there were a picture on the ground. "When one's mother is gone there is a hurting-place that nought doth ever come into any more —excepting daddy, and—and thee. We shall miss thee, Nick, at supper-times. Thou 'lt come back soon?"

"I am na coming back."

"Not coming back?" She laid the mutton-pie down on the bench.

"No—I am na coming back."

"Never?"

"Never."

She looked at him as if she had not altogether understood.

Nick turned away. A strange uneasiness had come upon him, as if some one were staring at him fixedly. But no one was. There was a Dutchman in the gate who had not been there just before. "He must have sprung up out of the ground," thought Nick, "or else he is a very sudden Dutchman!" He had on breeches like two great meal-sacks, and a Flemish sea-cloth jacket full of wrinkles, as if it had been lying in a chest. His back was turned, and Nick could not help smiling, for the fellow's shanks came out of his breeches' bottoms like the legs of a letter A. He looked like a pudding on two skewers.

Cicely slowly took up the mutton-pie once more, but did not eat. "Is na the pasty good?" asked Nick.

"Not now," said she.

Nick turned away again.

The Dutchman was not in the gate. He had crossed the inn-yard suddenly, and was sitting close within the shadow of the wall, though the sunny side was pleasanter by far. His wig was hanging down about his face, and he was talking with the tapster's knave, a hungry-looking fellow clad in rusty black as if some one were dead, although it was a holiday and he had neither kith nor kin. The knave was biting his under lip and staring straight at Nick.

"And will I never see thee more?" asked Cicely.

"Oh, yes," said Nick; "oh, yes."

But he did not know whether she ever would or no.

"Gee-wup, Dobbin! Yoicks, Ned! Tschk—tschk!" The leading cart rolled slowly through the gate. A second followed it. The drivers made a cracking with their whips, and all the guests came out to see them off. But the Dutchman, as the rest came out, arose, and with the tapster's knave went in at a narrow entrance beyond the tap-room steps.

"And when will Master Shakspere come for thee?" asked Cicely once more, the cold pie lying in her lap.

"I do na know. How can I tell? Do na bother me so!" cried Nick, and dug his heels into the cracks between the paving-stones; for after all that had come to pass the starting of the baggage-train had made him sick for home.

Cicely looked up at him; she thought she had not heard aright. He was staring after the last cart as it rolled through the inn-yard gate; his throat was working, and his eyes were full of tears.

"Why, Nick!" said she, "art crying?"

"Nay," said he, "but very near," and dashed his hand across his face. "Everything doth happen so all-at-once —and I am na big enough, Cicely. Oh, Cicely, I would I were a mighty king—I 'd make it all up different somehow!"

"Perhaps thou wilt be some day, Nick," she answered quietly. "Thou 'ldst make a very lovely king. I could be queen; and daddy should be Lord Admiral, and own the finest play-house in the town."

But Nick was staring at the tap-room door. A voice somewhere had startled him. The guests were gone, and none was left but the tapster's knave leaning against the inner wall.

"Thy mother should come to live with us, and thy father, and all thy kin," said Cicely, dreamily smiling; "and the people would love us, there would be no more war, and we should be happy forevermore."

But Nick was listening,—not to her,—and his face was a little pale. He felt a strange, uneasy sense of some one staring at his back. He whirled about—looked in at the tap-room window. For an instant a peering face was there; then it was gone—there was only the Dutchman's frowzy wig and striped woolen cap. But the voice he had heard and the face he had seen were the voice and the face of Gregory Goole.

"I should love to see thy mother, Nick," said Cicely.

He got up steadily, though his heart was jolting his very ribs. "Thou shalt right speedily!" said he.

The carts were standing in a line. The carrier came down the steps with his stirrup-cup in hand. Nick's heart gave a sudden, wild, resolute leap, and he touched the carrier on the arm. "What will ye charge to carry two as far as Stratford town?" he asked. His mouth was dry as a dusty road, for the Dutchman had risen from his seat and was coming toward the door.

"I do na haul past Oxford," said the man.

"To Oxford, then—how much? Be quick!" Nick thrust his hand into his breast where he carried the burgesses' chain.

"Eightpence the day, for three days out—two shilling 't is, and find yourself; it is an honest fare."

The tapster's knave came down the steps; the Dutchman stood within the shadow of the door.

"Wilt carry us for this?" Nick cried, and thrust the chain into the fellow's hands.

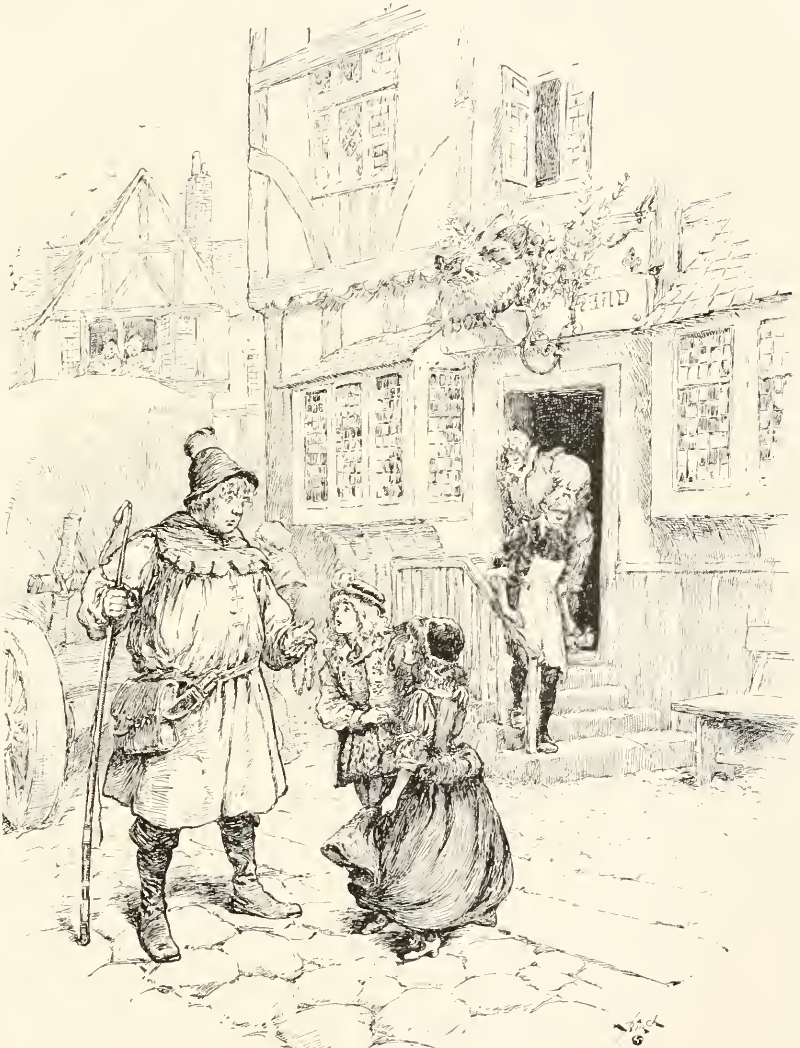
He gasped and almost let it fall. "Beshrew my heart! Gadzooks!" said he, "art thou a prince in hiding, boy? 'T would buy me, horses, wains, and all. Why, man alive, 't is but a nip o' this!"

"Good, then," said Nick, "'t is done—we 'll go. Come, Cicely, we 're going home!"

Staring, the carrier followed him, weighing the chain in his hairy hand. "Who art thou, boy?" he cried again. "This matter hath a queer look."

"'T was honestly come by, sir," cried Nick, no longer able to conceal a quiver in his voice, "and my name is Nicholas Attwood; I come from Stratford town."

"Stratford-on-Avon? Why, art kin to Tanner Simon Attwood there, Attwood of Old Town?"



"'WILT CARRY US FOR THIS?' NICK CRIED."

"He is my father, sir. Oh, leave us go with thee—take the whole chain!"

Slap went the carrier's cap in the dirt! "Leave thee go wi' me? Gadzooks!" he cried, "my name be John Saddler—why, what? my daddy liveth in Chapel lane, behind Will Underhill's. I stole thy father's apples fifteen years. What! go wi' me? Get on the wain, thou little fool—get on all the wains I own, and a plague upon thine eightpence, lad! Why, here; Hal telled me thou wert dead, or lost, or some such fairy tale! Up on the sheepskin, both o' ye!"

The Dutchman came from the tap-room door and spoke to the tapster's knave; but the words which he spoke to that tapster's knave were anything but Dutch.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WAYFARING HOME

AT Kensington watering-place, five miles from London town, Nick held the pail for the horses of the Oxford man. "Hello, my buck!" quoth he, and stared at Nick; "where under the sun didst pop from all at once?" and, looking up, spied Cicely upon the carrier's wain. "What, John!" he shouted, "thou saidst there were no more!"

"No more there were n't, sir," said John, "but there be now"; and out with the whole story.

"Well, I ha' farmed for fifty year," cried honest Roger Clout, "yet never have I seen the mate to yonder little maid, nor heard the like o' such a tale! Wife, wife!" he cried, in a voice as round and full of hearty cheer as one who calls his own cattle home across his own fat fields. "Come hither, Moll—here 's company for thee. For sure, John, they 'll ride wi' Moll and I; 't is godsend—angels on a baggage-cart! Moll ha' lost her only one, and the little maid will warm the cockles o' her heart, say nought about mine own. La, now, she is na feared o' me; God bless thee, child! Look at her, Moll—as sweet as honey and the cream o' the brindle cow."

So they rode with kindly Roger Clout and his good wife by Hanwell, Hillingdon Hill, and Uxbridge, where they rested at the inn near old St. Margaret's, Cicely with Mistress Clout, and Nick with her good man. And in the morning there was nothing to pay, for Roger Clout had footed all the score.

Then on again, through Beaconsfield and High Wycombe, into and over the Chiltern Hills in Buckinghamshire. In parts the land was passing fair, with sheep in flocks upon the hills, and cattle knee-deep in the grass; but otherwhere the way was wild, with bogs and moss in all the deeps, and dense beech forests on the heights; and more than once the guards made ready their match-locks warily. But stout John Saddler's train was no soft cakes for thieves, and they came up through Bucks scot-free.

At times it drizzled fitfully, and the road was rough and bad; but the third day was a fair, sweet day, and most exceeding bright and fresh. The shepherds whistled on the hills, and the milkmaids sang in the winding lanes among the white-thorn hedges, the smell of which was everywhere. The singing, the merry voices calling, the comfortable lowing of the kine, the bleating of the sheep, the clinking of the bridle-chains, and the heavy ruttle of the carts filled the air with life and cheer. The wind was blowing both warm and cool; and, oh, the blithe breeze of the English springtime! Nick went up the green hills and down the white dells like a leaf in the wind, now ahead and now behind the winding train, or off into the woods and over the fields for a posy-bunch for Cicely, calling and laughing back at her, and filling her lap with flowers and ferns until the cart was all one great, sweet-smelling bower.

As for Cicely, Nick was there, so she was very well content. She had never gone a-visiting in all her life before; and she would see Nick's mother, and the flowers in the yard, the well, and that wondrous stream, the Avon, of which Nick talked so much. "Stratford is a fair, fair town, though very full of fools," her father often said. But she had nothing to do with the fools, and daddy would come for her again; so her laughter bubbled like a little spring throughout the livelong day.

As the sun went down in the yellow west they came into Oxford from the south on the easterly side. The Cherwell burned with the orange light reflected from the sky, and the towers of the famous town of olden schools and scholars stood up black-purple against the western glow, with rims of gold on every roof and spire.

Up the High street into the corn-market rolled the tired train, and turned into the rambling square of the old Crown Inn near Carfax church, a large, substantial hostelry, one of merry England's best, clean-chambered, homelike, full of honest cheer.

There was a shout of greeting everywhere. The hostlers ran to walk the horses till they cooled, and to rub them down before they fed, for they were all afoam. Master Davenant himself saw to the storing of the wains; and

Mistress Davenant, a comely dame, with smooth brown hair and ruddy cheeks, and no less wit than sprightly grace, was in the porch to meet the company. "Well, good Dame Clout," said she, "art home again? What tales we 'll have! Didst see Tom Lane? No? Pshaw! But buss me, Moll; we 've missed thy butter parlously." And then quite free she kissed both Nick and Cicely.

"What, there, Dame Davenant!" cried Roger Clout, "art passing them around?" and laughed, "Do na forget me."

"Nay, nay," she answered, "but I 'm out. Here, Nan," she called to the smutty-faced scullery-maid, "a buss for Master Clout; his own Moll's busses be na fine enough since he hath been to town."

So, joking, laughing, they went in; while plain John Saddler backed out of the porch as sooty Nan came running up, for fear the jilt might offer somewhat of the sort to him, and was off in haste to see to his teams. "There 's no leaving it to the boys," said he, "for they 'd rub 'em down wi' a water-pail, and give 'em straw to drink."

When the guests all came to the fourpenny table to sup, Nick spoke to Master Roger Clout. "Ye 've done enough for us, sir; thank ye with all my heart; but I 've a turn will serve us here, and, sir, I 'd rather stand on mine own legs. Ye will na mind?" And when they all were seated at the board, he rose up stoutly at the end, and called out brave and clear: "Sirs, and good dames all, will ye be pleased to have some music while ye eat? For, if ye will, the little maid and I will sing you the latest song from

London town, a merry thing, with a fine trolly-lolly, sirs, to glad your hearts with hearing."

Would they have music? To be sure! Who would not music while he ate must be a Flemish dunderkopf, said they. So Nick and Cicely stood at one side of the room upon a bench by the server's board, and sang together, while he played upon Mistress Davenant's gittern:

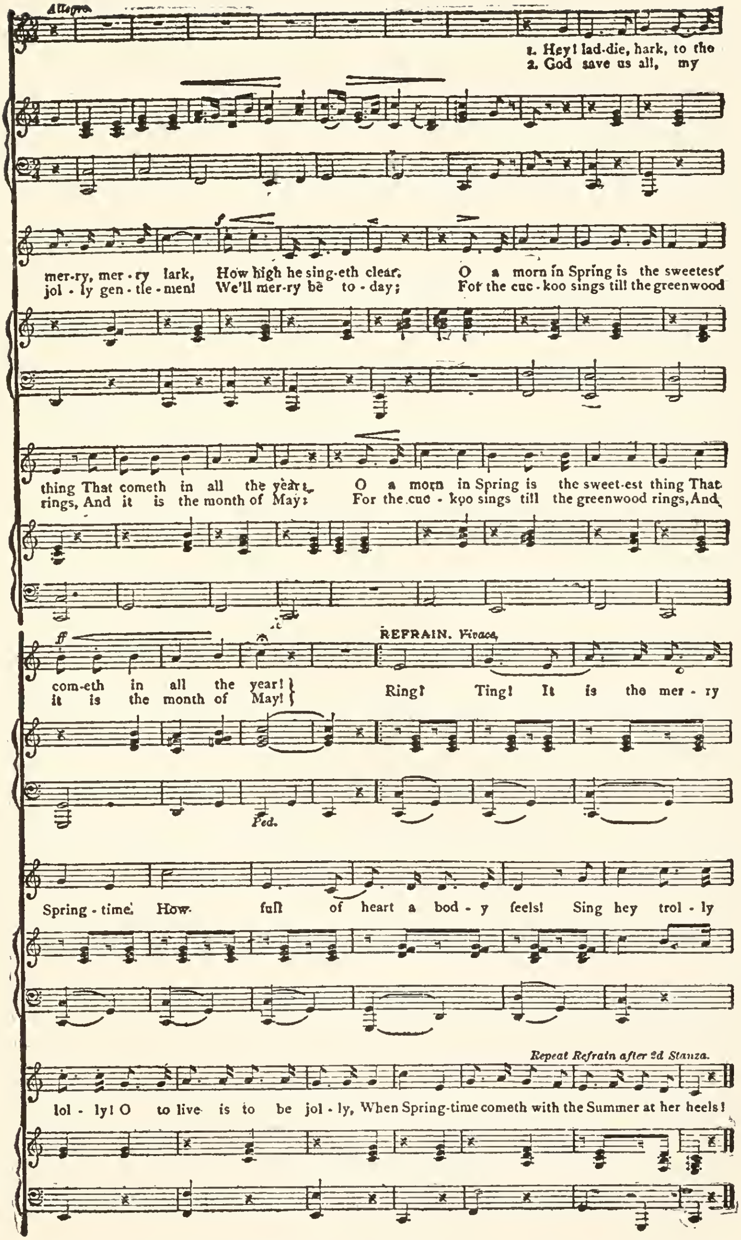
"Hey, laddie, hark to the merry, merry lark!
  How high he singeth clear:
'Oh, a morn in spring is the sweetest thing
  That cometh in all the year!
Oh, a morn in spring is the sweetest thing
  That cometh in all the year!'

"Ring, ting! it is the merry springtime;
  How full of heart a body feels!
Sing hey, trolly-lolly! oh, to live is to be jolly,
  When springtime cometh with the summer at her heels!

"God save us all, my jolly gentlemen,
  We'll merry be to-day;
For the cuckoo sings till the greenwood rings,
  And it is the month of May!
For the cuckoo sings till the greenwood rings,
  And it is the month of May!"

Then the men at the table all waved their pewter pots, and thumped upon the board, roaring, "Hey, trolly-lolly! oh, to live is to be jolly!" until the rafters rang.

"What, lad!" cried good Dame Davenant, "come, stay with me all year and sing, thou and this little maid o' thine. 'T will cost thee neither cash nor care. Why, thou


Allegro.
1. Hey! lad-die, hark, to the
2. God save us all, my
mer-ry, mer - ry lark, How high he sing-eth clear, O a morn in Spring is the sweetest
jol - ly gen - tle - men! We'll mer-ry be to - day; For the cuc - koo sings till the greenwood
thing That cometh in all the year, O a morn in Spring is the sweet-est thing That
rings, And it is the month of May: For the cuc - koo sings till the greenwood rings, And
ff
com-eth in all the year!
it is the month of May!
REFRAIN. Vivace.
Ring! Ting! It is the mer - ry
Ped.
Spring - time! How full of heart a bod - y feels! Sing hey trol - ly
Repeat Refrain after 2d Stanza.
lol - ly! O to live is to be jol - ly, When Spring-time cometh with the Summer at her heels!

'ldst fill the house with such a throng as it hath never seen!" And in the morning she would not take a penny for their lodging nor their keep. "Nay, nay," said she; "they ha' brought good custom to the house, and left me a brave little tale to tell for many a good long year. We inns-folk be not common penny-grabbers; marry, no!" and, furthermore, she made interest with a carrier to give them a lift to Woodstock on their way.

When they came to Woodstock the carrier set them down by the gates of a park built round by a high stone wall over which they could not see, and with his wain went in at the gate, leaving them to journey on together through a little rain-shower.

The land grew flatter than before. There were few trees upon the hills, and scarcely any springs at which to drink, but much tender grass, with countless sheep nibbling everywhere. The shower was soon blown away; the sun came out; and a pleasant wind sprang up out of the south. Here and there beside some cottage wall the lilacs bloomed, and the later orchard-trees were apple-pink and cherry-white with May.

They came to a puddle in the road where there was a dance of butterflies. Cicely clapped her hands with glee. A goldfinch dipped across the path like a little yellow streak of laughter in the sun. "Oh, Nick, what is it?" she cried.

"A bird," said he.

"A truly bird?" and she clasped her hands. "Will it ever come again?"

"Again? Oh, yes, or, la! another one—there 's plenty in the weeds."

And so they fared all afternoon, until at dusk they came to Chipping Norton across the fields, a short cut to where the thin blue supper-smoke curled up. The mists were rising from the meadows; earth and sky were blending on the hills; a little silver sickle moon hung in the fading violet, low in the western sky. Under an old oak in a green place a fiddler and a piper were playing, and youths and maidens were dancing in the brown light. Some little chaps were playing blindman's-buff near by, and the older folk were gathered by the tree.

Nick came straight to where they stood, and bowing, he and Cicely together, doffed his cap, and said in his most London tone, "We bid ye all good-e'en, good folk."

His courtly speech and manner, as well as his clothes and Cicely's jaunty gown, no little daunted the simple country folk. Nobody spoke, but, standing silent, all stared at the two quaint little vagabonds as mild kine stare at passing sheep in a quiet lane.

"We need somewhat to eat this night, and we want a place to sleep," said Nick. "The beds must be right clean—we have good appetites. If ye can do for us, we will dance for you anything that ye may desire—the 'Queen's Own Measure,' 'La Donzella,' the new 'Allemand' of my Lord Pembroke, a pavone or a tinternell, or the 'Galliard of Savoy.' Which doth it please you, mistresses?" and he bowed to the huddling young women, who scarcely knew what to make of it.

"La! Joan," whispered one, "he calleth thee 'mistress'! Speak up, wench." But Joan stoutly held her peace.

"Or if ye will, the little maid will dance the coranto for you, straight from my Lord Chancellor's dancing-master; and while she dances I will sing."

"Why, hark 'e, Rob," spoke out one motherly dame, "they two do look clean-like. Children, too—who 'd gi' them stones when they beg for bread? I 'll do for them this night myself; and thou, the good man, and Kit can sleep in the hutch. So there, dears; now let 's see the Lord Chancellor's tantrums."

"'T is not a tantrums, goody," said Nick, politely, "but a coranto."

"La! young master, what 's the odds, just so we sees it done? Some folks calls whittles 'knives,' and thinks 't wunnot cut theys fingers!"

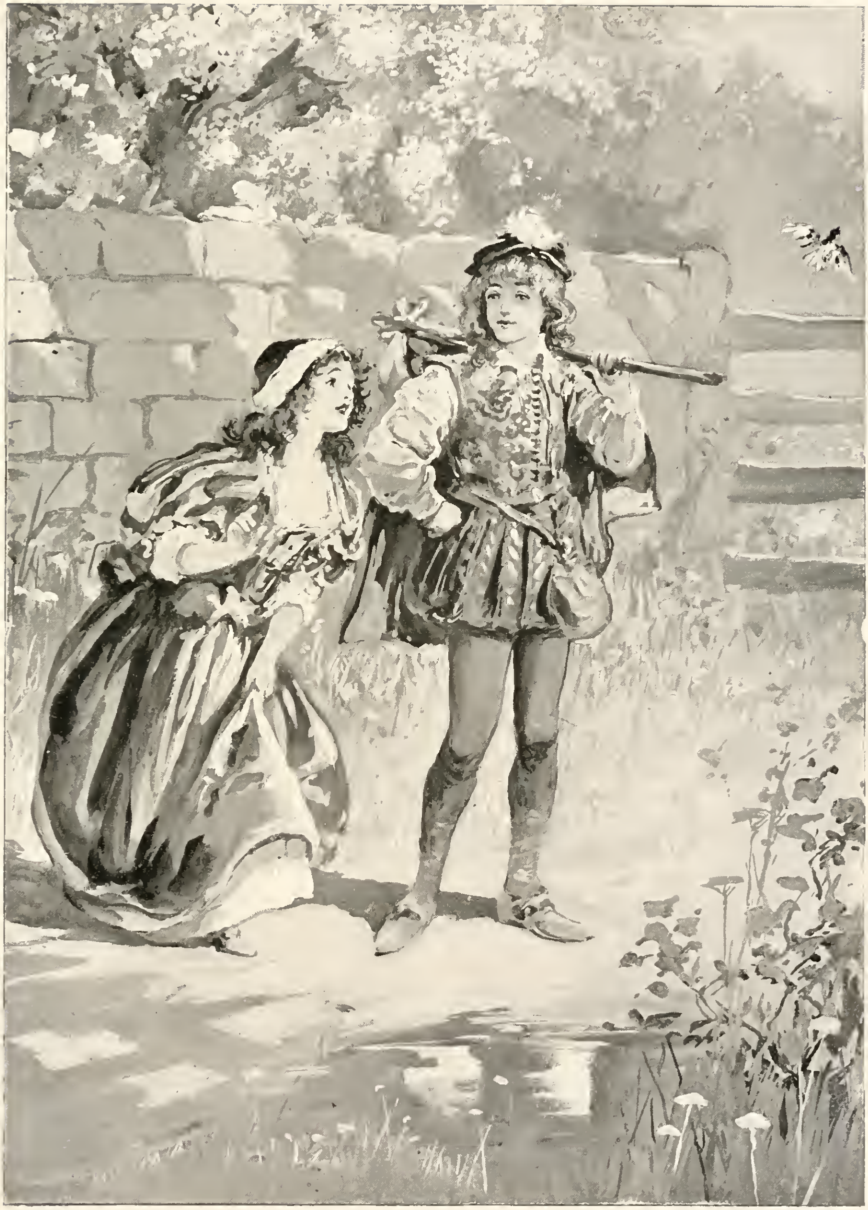
Nick took his place at the side of the ring. "Now, Cicely!" said he.

"Thou 'lt call 'Sa—sa!' and give me the time of the coup d'archet?" she whispered, timidly hesitant, as she stepped to the midst of the ring.

"Ay, then," said he, "'t is off, 't is off!" and struck up a lively tune, snapping his fingers for the time.

Cicely, bowing all about her, slowly began to dance.

It was a pretty sight to see: her big eyes wide and earnest, her cheeks a little flushed, her short hair curling, and her crimson gown fluttering about her as she danced the quaint running step forward and back across the grass, balancing archly, with her hands upon her hips and a little



"'OH, NICK, WHAT IS IT?' SHE CRIED."

smile upon her lips, in the swaying motion of the coupee, courtesying gracefully as one tiny slippered foot peeped out from her rustling skirt, tapping on the turf, now in front and now behind. Nick sang like a blackbird in the hedge. And how those country lads and lasses stared to see such winsome, dainty grace! "La me!" gaped one, "'t is fairy folk—she doth na even touch the ground!" "The pretty dear!" the mothers said. "Doll, why canst thou na do the like, thou lummox?" "Tut," sighed the buxom Doll, "I have na wingses on my feet!"

Then Cicely, breathless, bowed, and ran to Nick's side asking, "Was it all right, Nick?"

"Right?" said he, and stroked her hair; "'t was better than thou didst ever dance it for M'sieu."

"For why?" said she, and flushed, with a quick light in her eyes; "for why—because this time I danced for thee."

The country folk, enchanted, called for more and more.

Nick sang another song, and he and Cicely danced the galliard together, while the piper piped and the fiddler fiddled away like mad; and the moon went down, and the cottage doors grew ruddy with the light inside. Then Dame Pettiford gave them milk and oat-cakes in a bowl, a bit of honey in the comb, and a cup of strawberries; and Cicely fell fast asleep with the last of the strawberries in her hand.

So they came up out of the south through Shipston-on-Stour, in the main-traveled way, and with every mile Nick felt home growing nearer. Streams sprang up in the meadow-lands, with sedgy islands, and lines of silvery willows bordering their banks. Flocks and herds cropped beneath tofts of ash and elm and beech. Snug homes peeped out of hazel copses by the road. The passing carts had a familiar look, and at Alderminster Nick saw a man he thought he recognized.

Before he knew that he was there they topped Edge Hill.

There lay Stratford! as he had left it lying; not one stick or stack or stone but he could put his finger on and say, "This place I know!" Green pastures, grassy levels, streams, groves, mills, the old grange and the manor-house, the road that forked in three, and the hills of Arden beyond it all. There was the tower of the guildhall chapel above the clustering, dun-thatched roofs among the green and blossom-white; to left the spire of Holy Trinity sprang up beside the shining Avon. Bull Lane he made out dimly, and a red-tiled roof among the trees. "There, Cicely," he said, "*there—there!*" and laughed a queer little shaky laugh next door to crying for joy.

Wat Raven was sweeping old Clopton bridge. "Hullo, there, Wat! I be come home again!" Nick cried. Wat stared at him, but knew him not at all.

Around the corner, and down High street. Fynes Morrison burst in at the guildschool door. "Nick Attwood 's home!" he shouted; and his eyes were like two plates.

Then the last lane—and the smoke from his father's house!

The garden gate stood open, and there was some one working in the yard. “It is my father, Cicely,” he laughed. “Father!” he cried, and hurried in the lane.

Simon Attwood straightened up and looked across the fence. His arms were held a little out, and his hands hung down with bits of moist earth clinging to them. His brows were darker than a year before, and his hair was grown more gray; his back, too, stooped. “Art thou a-calling me?” he asked.

Nick laughed. “Why, father, do ye na know me?” he cried out. “’T is I—’t is Nick—come home!”

Two steps the stern old tanner took—two steps to the latchet-gate. Not one word did he speak; but he set his hand to the latchet-gate and closed it in Nick’s face.

CHAPTER XXXVII

TURNED ADRIFT

DOWN the path and under the gate the rains had washed a shallow rut in the earth. Two pebbles, loosened by the closing of the gate, rolled down the rut and out upon the little spreading fan of sand that whitened in the grass.

There was the house with the black beams checkering its yellow walls. There was the old bench by the door, and the lettuce in the garden-bed. There were the bee-hives, and the bees humming among the orchard boughs.

"Why, father, what!" cried Nick, "dost na know me yet? See, 't is I, Nick, thy son."

A strange look came into the tanner's face. "I do na know thee, boy," he answered heavily; "thou canst na enter here."

"But, father, indeed 't is I!"

Simon Attwood looked across the town; yet he did not see the town: across the town into the sky; yet he did not see the sky, nor the drifting banks of cloud, nor the sunlight shining on the clouds. "I say I do na know thee," he replied; "be off to the place whence ye ha' come."

Nick's hand was almost on the latch. He stopped. He looked up into his father's face. "Why, father, I 've come home!" he gasped.

The gate shook in the tanner's grip. "Have I na telled thee twice I do na know thee, boy? No house o' mine shall e'er be home for thee. Thou hast no part nor parcel here. Get thee out o' my sight."

"Oh, father, father, what do ye mean?" cried Nick, his lips scarcely able to shape the words.

"Do na ye 'father' me no more," said Simon Attwood, bitterly; "I be na father to stage-playing, vagabond rogues. And be gone, I say. Dost hear? Must I e'en thrust thee forth?" He raised his hand as if to strike.

Nick fell away from the latchet-gate, dumb-stricken with amazement, shame, and grief.

"Oh, Nick," cried Cicely, "come away—the wicked, wicked man!"

"It is my father, Cicely."

She stared at him. "And thou dost hate *my* father so? Oh, Nick! oh, Nick!"

"Will ye be gone?" called Simon Attwood, half-way opening the gate; "must I set constables on thee?"

Nick did not move. A numbness had crept over him like palsy. Cicely caught him by the hand. "Come, let us go back to my father," she said. "He will not turn us out."

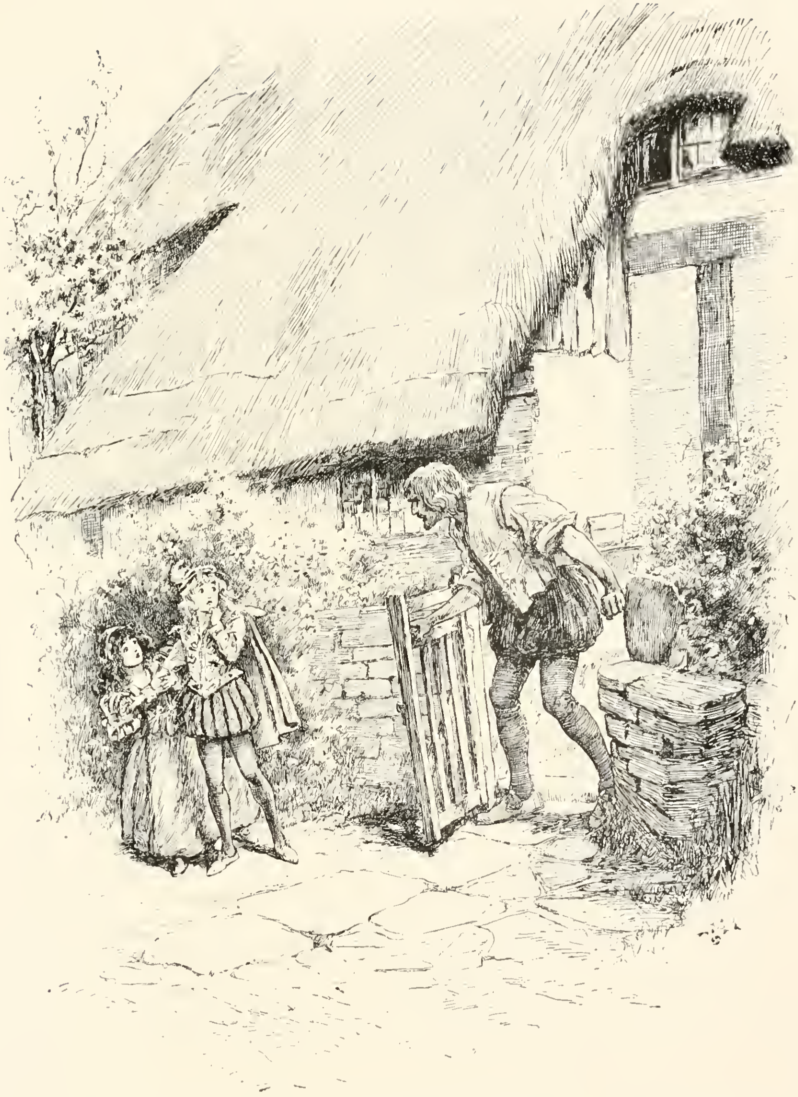
Scarcely knowing what he did, he followed her, stumbling in the level path as though he were half blind or had been beaten upon the head. He did not cry. This was past all crying. He let himself be led along—it made no matter where.

In Chapel lane there was a crowd along the Great House wall; and on the wall Ned Cooke and Martin Addenbroke were sitting. There were heads of people moving on the porch and in the court, and the yard was all a-bustle and to-do. But there was nobody in the street, and no one looked at Nick and Cicely.

The Great House did look very fair in the sun of that May day, with its homely gables of warm red brick and sunburnt timber, its cheery roof of Holland tile, and with the sunlight flashing from the diamond panes that were leaded into the sashes of the great bay-window on the eastern garden side.

In the garden all was stir-about and merry voices. There was a little green court before the house, and a pleasant lawn coming down to the lane from the doorway porch. The house stood to the left of the entry-drive, and the barn-yard to the right was loud with the blithe crowing of the cocks. But the high brick wall shut out the street where Nick and Cicely trudged dolefully along, and to Nick the lane seemed very full of broken crockery and dirt, and the sunlight all a mockery. The whole of the year had not yet been so dark as this, for there had ever been the dream of coming home. But *now*—he suffered himself to be led along; that was enough.

They had come past the Great House up from Chapel



"'WILL YE BE GONE?' CALLED SIMON ATTWOOD, . . . 'MUST I SET CONSTABLES ON THEE?'"

street, when a girl came out of the western gate, and with her hand above her eyes looked after them. She seemed in doubt, but looked again, quite searchingly. Then, as one who is not sure, but does not wish to miss a chance, called out, "Nick Attwood! Nick Attwood!"

Cicely looked back to see who called. She did not know the girl, but saw her beckon. "There is some one calling, Nick," said she.

Nick stopped in a hopeless sort of way, and looked back down the street.

When he had turned so that the girl at the gate could see his face, she left the gate wide open behind her, and came running quickly up the street after them. As she drew nearer he saw that it was Susanna Shakspere, though she was very much grown since he had seen her last. He watched her running after them as if it were none of his affair. But when she had caught up with them, she took him by the shoulder smartly and drew him back toward the gate. "Why, Nicholas Attwood," she cried, all out of breath, "come straightway into the house with me. My father hath been hunting after thee the whole way up from London town!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A STRANGE DAY

THERE in the Great House garden under the mulberry-trees stood Master Will Shakspere, with Masters Jonson, Burbage, Hemynge, Condell, and a goodly number more, who had just come up from London town, as well as Alderman Henry Walker of Stratford, good old John Combe of the college, and Michael Drayton, the poet of Warwick. For Master Shakspere had that morning bought the Great House, with its gardens and barns, of Master William Underhill, for sixty pounds sterling, and was making a great feast for all his friends to celebrate the day.

The London players all clapped their hands as Nick and Cicely came up the garden-path, and, "Upon my word, Will," declared Master Jonson, "the lad is a credit to this old town of thine. A plucky fellow, I say, a right plucky fellow. Found the lass and brought her home all safe and sound—why, 't is done like a true knight-errant!"

Master Shakspere met them with outstretched hands. "Thou young rogue," said he, smiling, "how thou hast forestalled us! Why, here we have been weeping for thee as lost, strayed, or stolen; and all the while thou wert nestling in the bosom of thine own sweet home. How is the beloved little mother?"

"I ha' na seen my mother," faltered Nick. "Father will na let me in."

"What? How?"

"My father will na have me any more, sir—saith I shall never be his son again. Oh, Master Shakspere, why did they steal me from home?"

They were all crowding about now, and Master Shakspere had hold of the boy. "Why, what does this mean?" he asked. "What on earth has happened?"

Between the two children, in broken words, the story came out.

"Why, this is a sorry tale!" said Master Shakspere. "Does the man not know that thou wert stolen, that thou wert kept against thy will, that thou hast trudged halfway from London for thy mother's sake?"

"He will na leave me tell him, sir. He would na even listen to me!"

"The muckle shrew!" quoth Master Jonson. "Why, I 'll have this out with him! By Jupiter, I 'll read him reason with a vengeance!" With a clink of his rapier he made as if to be off at once.

"Nay, Ben," said Master Shakspere; "cool thy blood—a quarrel will not serve. This tanner is a bitter-minded, heavy-handed man—he 'd only throw thee in a pickling-vat."

"What? Then he 'd never tan another hide!"

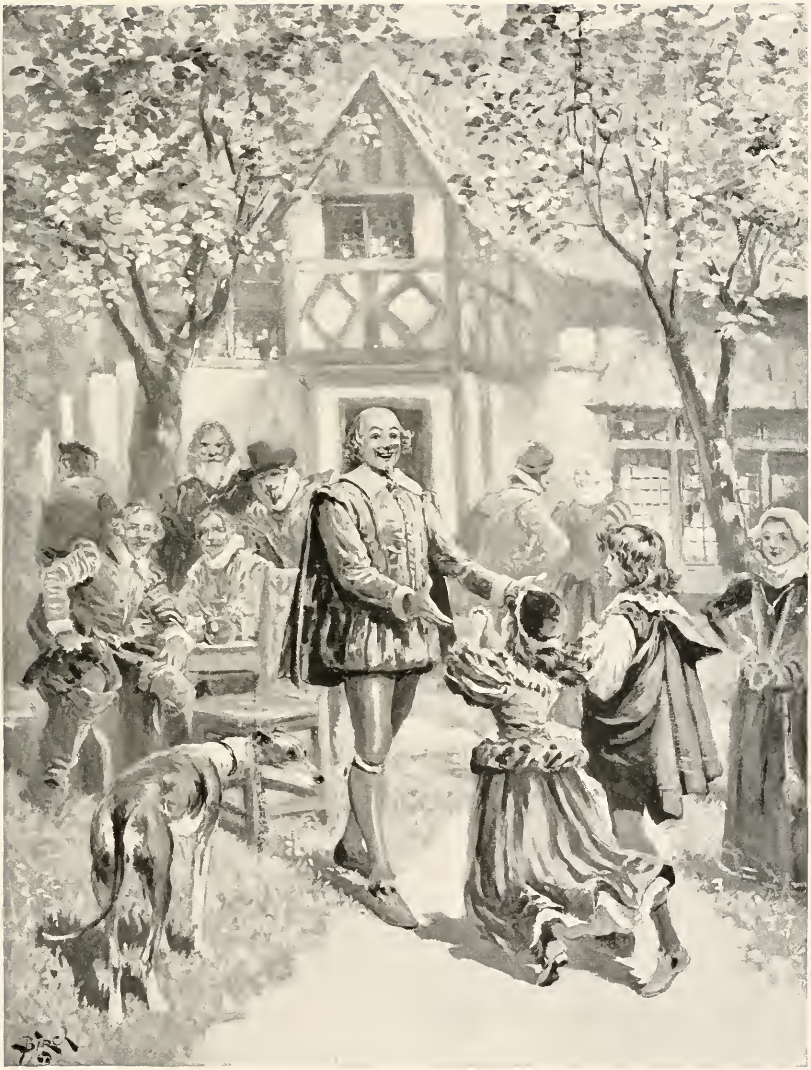
"And would that serve the purpose, Ben? The cure should better the disease—the children must be thought about."

"The children? Why, as for them," said Master Jonson, in his blunt, outspoken way, "I 'll think thee a thought offhand to serve the turn. What? Why, this tanner calls us vagabonds. Vagabonds, forsooth! Yet vagabonds are gallows-birds, and gallows-birds are ravens. And ravens, men say, do foster forlorn children. Take my point? Good, then; let us ravenous vagabonds take these two children for our own, Will,—thou one, I t' other,—and by praiseworthy fostering singe this fellow's very brain with shame."

"Why, here, here, Ben Jonson," spoke up Master Burbage, "this is all very well for Will and thee; but, pray, where do Hemynge, Condell, and I come in upon the bill? Come, man, 't is a pity if we cannot all stand together in this real play as well as in all the make-believe."

"That 's my sort!" cried Master Hemynge. "Why, what? Here is a player's daughter who has no father, and a player whose father will not have him,—orphaned by fate, and disinherited by folly,—common stock with us all! Marry, 't is a sort of stock I want some of. Kind hearts are trumps, my honest Ben—make it a stock company, and let us all be in."

"That 's no bad fancy," added Condell, slowly, for John Condell was a cold, shrewd man. "There 's merit in the lad beside his voice—*that* cannot keep its freshness long;



"MASTER SHAKSPERE MET THEM WITH OUTSTRETCHED HANDS."

but his figure 's good, his wit is quick, and he has a very taking style. It would be worth while, Dick. And, Will," said he, turning to Master Shakspere, who listened with half a smile to all that the others said, "he 'll make a better *Rosalind* than Roger Prynne for thy new play."

"So he would," said Master Shakspere; "but before we put him into 'As You Like It,' suppose we ask him how he does like it? Nick, thou hast heard what all these gentlemen have said—what hast thou to say, my lad?"

"Why, sirs, ye are all kind," said Nick, his voice beginning to tremble, "very, very kind indeed, sirs; but—I—I want my mother—oh, masters, I do want my mother!"

At that John Combe turned on his heel and walked out of the gate. Out of the garden-gate walked he, and down the dirty lane, setting his cane down stoutly as he went, past gravel-pits and pens to Southam's lane, and in at the door of Simon Attwood's tannery.

It was noon when he went in; yet the hour struck, and no one came or went from the tannery. Mistress Attwood's dinner grew cold upon the board, and Dame Combe looked vainly across the fields toward the town.

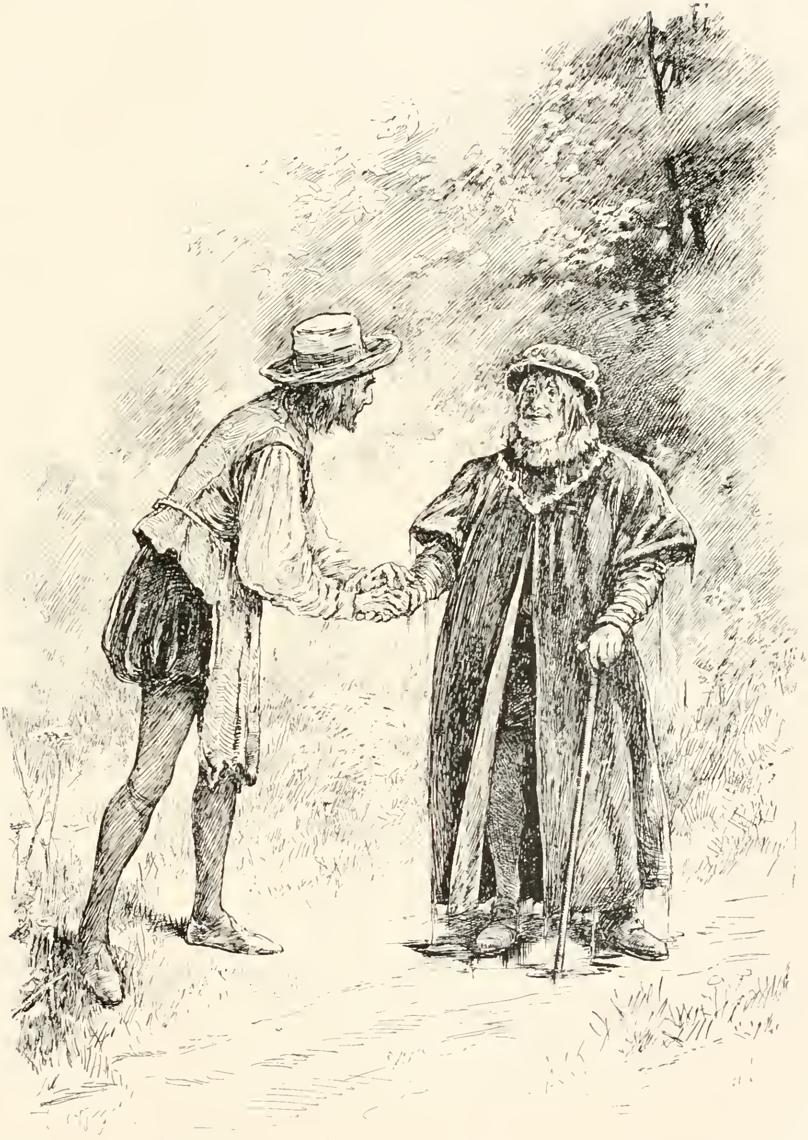
But about the middle of the afternoon John Combe came out of the tannery door, and Simon Attwood came behind him. And as John Combe came down the cobbled way, a trail of brown vat-liquor followed him, dripping from his clothes, for he was soaked to the skin. His long gray hair had partly dried in strings about his ears, and his fine lace collar was a drabbled shame; but there was a singular untroubled smile upon his plain old face.

Simon Attwood stayed to lock the door, fumbling his keys as if his sight had failed; but when the heavy bolt was shut, he turned and called after John Combe, so that the old man stopped in the way and dripped a puddle until the tanner came up to where he stood. And as he came up Attwood asked, in such a tone as none had ever heard from his mouth before, "Combe, John Combe, what 's done 's done,—and oh, John, the pity of it,—yet will ye still shake hands wi' me, John, afore ye go?"

John Combe took Simon Attwood's bony hand and wrung it hard in his stout old grip, and looked the tanner squarely in the eyes; then, still smiling serenely to himself, and setting his cane down stoutly as he walked, dripped home, and got himself into dry clothes without a word.

But Simon Attwood went down to the river, and sat upon a flat stone under some pollard willows, and looked into the water.

What his thoughts were no one knew, nor ever shall know; but he was fighting with himself, and more than once groaned bitterly. At first he only shut his teeth and held his temples in his hands; but after a while he began to cry to himself, over and over again, "O Absalom, my son, my son! O my son Absalom!" and then only "My son, my son!" And when the day began to wane above the woods of Arden, he arose, and came up from the river, walking swiftly; and, looking neither to the right nor to



"JOHN COMBE TOOK SIMON ATTWOOD'S BONY HAND AND WRUNG IT HARD."

the left, came up to the Great House garden, and went in at the gate.

At the door the servant met him, but saw his face, and let him pass without a word; for he looked like a desperate man whom there was no stopping.

So, with a grim light burning in his eyes, his hat in his hand, and his clothes all drabbled with the liquor from his vats, the tanner strode into the dining-hall.

CHAPTER XXXIX

ALL 'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

THE table had been cleared of trenchers and napkins, the crumbs brushed away, and a clean platter set before each guest with pared cheese, fresh cherries, biscuit, caraways, and wine.

There were about the long table, beside Master Shakspere himself, who sat at the head of the board, Masters Richard and Cuthbert Burbage, John Condell, and Peter Hemynge, Master Shakspere's partners; Master Ben Jonson, his dearest friend; Thomas Pope, who played his finest parts; John Lowin, Samuel Gilburne, Robert Nash, and William Kemp, players of the Lord Chamberlain's company; Edmund Shakspere, the actor, who was Master William Shakspere's younger brother, and Master John Shakspere, his father; Michael Drayton, the Midland bard; Burgess Robert Getley, Alderman Henry Walker, and William Hart, the Stratford hatter, brother-in-law to Master Shakspere.

On one side of the table, between Master Jonson and Master Richard Burbage, Cicely was seated upon a high chair, with a wreath of early crimson roses in her hair, attired in the gown in which Nick saw her first a year before. On the other side of the table Nick had a place between Master Drayton and Robert Getley, father of his friend Robin. Half-way down there was an empty chair. Master John Combe was absent.

It was no common party. In all England better company could not have been found. Some few of them the whole round world could not have matched then, and could not match now.

It would be worth a fortune to know the things they said,—the quips, the jests, the merry tales that went around that board,—but time has left too little of what such men said and did, and it can be imagined only by the brightest wits.

'T was Master Shakspere on his feet, welcoming his friends to his "New Place" with quiet words that made them glad to live and to be there, when suddenly he stopped, his hands upon the table by his chair, and stared.

The tanner stood there, silent, in the door.

Nick's face turned pale. Cicely clung to Master Jonson's arm.

Simon Attwood stepped into the room, and Master Shakspere went quickly to meet him in the middle of the floor.

"Master Will Shakspere," said the tanner, hoarsely, "I ha' come about a matter." There he stopped, not knowing what to say, for he was overwrought.

"Out with it, sir," said Master Shakspere, sternly. "There is much here to be said."

The tanner wrung his hat within his hands, and looked about the ring of cold, averted faces. Soft words with him were few; he had forgotten tender things; and, indeed, what he meant to do was no easy thing for any man.

"Come, say what thou hast to say," said Master Shakspere, resolutely; "and say it quickly, that we may have done."

"There 's nought that I can say," said Simon Attwood, "but that I be sorry, and I want my son! Nick! Nick!" he faltered brokenly, "I be wrung for thee; will ye na come home—just for thy mother's sake, Nick, if ye will na come for mine?"

Nick started from his seat with a glad cry—then stopped. "But Cicely?" he said.

The tanner wrung his hat within his hands, and his face was dark with trouble. Master Shakspere looked at Master Jonson.

Nick stood hesitating between Cicely and his father, faithful to his promise, though his heart was sick for home.

An odd light had been struggling dimly in Simon Attwood's troubled eyes. Then all at once it shone out bright and clear, and he clapped his bony hand upon the stout oak chair. "Bring her along," he said. "I ha' little enough, but I will do the best I can. Maybe 't will somehow right the wrong I ha' done," he added huskily. "And, neighbors, I 'll go surety to the Council that she shall na fall a pauper or a burden to the town. My trade is ill enough, but, sirs, it will stand for forty pound the year at a fair cast-up. Bring the lass wi' thee, Nick—we 'll make out, lad, we 'll make out. God will na let it all go wrong."

Master Jonson and Master Shakspere had been nodding and talking together in a low tone, smiling like men very well pleased about something, and directly Master Shakspere left the room.

"Wilt thou come, lad?" asked the tanner, holding out his hands.

"Oh, father!" cried Nick; then he choked so that he could say no more, and his eyes were so full of mist that he could scarcely find his father where he stood.

But there was no need of more; Simon Attwood was answered.

Voices buzzed about the room. The servants whispered in the hall. Nick held his father's gnarled hand in his own, and looked curiously up into his face, as if for the first time knowing what it was to have a father.

"Well, lad, what be it?" asked the tanner, huskily, laying his hand on his son's curly head, which was nearly up to his shoulder now.

"Nothing," said Nick, with a happy smile, "only mother will be glad to have Cicely—won't she?"

Master Shakspere came into the room with something in his hand, and walking to the table, laid it down.

It was a heavy buckskin bag, tied tightly with a silken cord, and sealed with red wax stamped with the seals of Master Shakspere and Master Jonson.

Every one was watching him intently, and one or two of the gentlemen from London were smiling in a very knowing way.

He broke the seals, and loosening the thong which closed the bag, took out two other bags, one of which was just double its companion's size. They also were tied with silken cord and sealed with the two seals on red wax. There was something printed roughly with a quill pen upon each bag, but Master Shakspere kept that side turned toward himself so that the others could not see.

"Come, come, Will," broke in Master Jonson, "don't be all day about it!"

"The more haste the worse speed, Ben," said Master Shakspere, quietly. "I have a little story to tell ye all."

So they all listened.

"When Gaston Carew, lately master-player of the Lord High Admiral's company, was arraigned before my Lord Justice for the killing of that rascal, Fulk Sandells, there was not a man of his own company had the grace to lend him even so much as sympathy. But there were still some in London who would not leave him totally friendless in such straits."

"Some?" interrupted Master Jonson, bluntly; "then o-n-e spells 'some.' The names of them all were Will Shakspere."

"Tut, tut, Ben!" said Master Shakspere, and went on: "But when the charge was read, and those against him showed their hand, it was easy to see that the game was up. No one saw this any sooner than Carew himself; yet he carried himself like a man, and confessed the indictment without a quiver. They brought him the book, to read a verse and save his neck, perhaps, by pleading benefit of clergy. But he knew the temper of those against him, and that nothing might avail; so he refused the plea quietly, saying, 'I am no clerk, sirs. All I wish to read in this case is what my own hand wrote upon that scoundrel Sandells.' It was soon over. When the judge pronounced his doom, all Carew asked was for a friend to speak with a little while aside. This the court allowed; so he sent for me—we played together with Henslowe, he and I, ye know. He had not much to say—for once in his life,"—here Master Shakspere smiled pityingly,—"but he sent his love forever to his only daughter Cicely."

Cicely was sitting up, listening with wide eyes, and eagerly nodded her head as if to say, "Of course."

"He also begged of Nicholas Attwood that he would forgive him whatever wrong he had done him."

"Why, that I will, sir," choked Nick, brokenly; "he was wondrous kind to me, except that he would na leave me go."

"After that," continued Master Shakspere, "he made known to me a sliding panel in the wainscot of his house, wherein was hidden all he had on earth to leave to those he loved the best, and who, he hoped, loved him."

"Everybody loves my father," said Cicely, smiling and nodding again. Master Jonson put his arm around the back of her chair, and she leaned her head upon it.

"Carew said that he had marked upon the bags which were within the panel the names of the persons to whom they were to go, and had me swear, upon my faith as a Christian man, that I would see them safely delivered according to his wish. This being done, and the end come, he kissed me on both cheeks, and standing bravely up, spoke to them all, saying that for a man such as he had been it was easier to end even so than to go on. I never saw him again."

The great writer of plays paused a moment, and his lips moved as if he were saying a prayer. Master Burbage crossed himself.

"The bags were found within the wall, as he had said, and were sealed by Ben Jonson and myself until we should find the legatees—for they had disappeared as utterly as if the earth had gaped and swallowed them. But, by the Father's grace, we have found them safe and sound at last; and all 's well that ends well!"

Here he turned the buckskin bags around.

On one, in Master Carew's school-boy scrawl, was printed, "For myne Onelie Beeloved Doghter, Cicely Carew"; on the other, "For Nicholas Attewode, alias Mastre Skie-lark, whom I, Gaston Carew, Player, Stole Away from Stratford Toune, Anno Domini 1596."

Nick stared; Cicely clapped her hands; and Simon Attwood sat down dizzily.

"There," said Master Shakspere, pointing to the second bag, "are one hundred and fifty gold rose-nobles. In the other just three hundred more. Neighbor Attwood, we shall have no paupers here."

Everybody laughed then and clapped their hands, and the London players gave a rousing cheer. Master Ben Jonson's shout might have been heard in Market Square.

At this tremendous uproar the servants peeped at the doors and windows; and Tom Boteler, peering in from the buttery hall, and seeing the two round money-bags plumping on the table, crept away with such a look of amazement upon his face that Mollikins, the scullery-maid, thought he had seen a ghost, and fled precipitately into the pantry.

"And what 's more, Neighbor Tanner," said Master Richard Burbage, "had Carew's daughter not sixpence to her name, we vagabond players, as ye have had the scanty grace to dub us, would have cared for her for the honour of the craft, and reared her gently in some quiet place where there never falls even the shadow of such evil things as have been the end of many a right good fellow beside old Kit Marlowe and Gaston Carew."

"And to that end, Neighbor Attwood," Master Shakspere added, "we have, through my young Lord Hunsdon, who has just been made State Chamberlain, Her Majesty's gracious permission to hold this money in trust for the little maid as guardians under the law."

Cicely stared around perplexed. "Won't Nick be there?" she asked. "Why, then I will not go—they shall not take thee from me, Nick!" and she threw her arms around him. "I 'm going to stay with thee till daddy comes, and be thine own sister forever."

Master Jonson laughed gently, not his usual roaring laugh, but one that was as tender as his own bluff heart.

"Why, good enough, good enough! The woman who mothered a lad like Master Skylark here is surely fit to rear the little maid."

The London players thumped the table. "Why, 't is the very trick," said Hemynge. "Marry, this is better than a play."

"It is indeed," quoth Condell. "See the plot come out!"

"Thou 'lt do it, Attwood—why, of course thou 'lt do it," said Master Shakspere. "'T is an excellent good plan. These funds we hold in trust will keep thee easy-minded, and warrant thee in doing well by both our little folks. And what 's more," he cried, for the thought had just come in his head, "I have ever heard thee called an honest man; hard, indeed, perhaps too hard, but honest as the day is long. Now I need a tenant for this New Place of mine—some married man with a good housewife, and children to be delving in the posy-beds outside. What sayst thou, Simon Attwood? They tell me thy 'prentice, Job Hortop, is to marry in July—he 'll take thine old house at a fair rental. Why, here, Neighbor Attwood, thou toil-worn, time-damaged tanner, bless thy hard old heart, man, come, be at ease—thou hast ground thy soul out long enough! Come, take me at mine offer—be my fellow. The rent shall trickle off thy finger-tips as easily as water off a duck's back!"

Simon Attwood arose from the chair where he had been sitting. There was a bewildered look upon his face, and he was twisting his horny fingers together until the knuckles were white. His lips parted as if to speak, but he only swallowed very hard once or twice instead, and looked around at them all. "Why, sir," he said at length, looking at Master Shakspere, "why, sirs, all of ye—I ha' been a hard man, and summat of a fool, sirs, ay, sirs, a very fool. I ha' misthought and miscalled ye foully many a time, and many a time. God knows I be sorry for it from the bottom o' my heart!" And with that he sat down and buried his face in his arms among the dishes on the buffet.

"Nay, Simon Attwood," said Master Shakspere, going to his side and putting his hand upon the tanner's shoulder, "thou hast only been mistaken, that is all. Come, sit thee up. To see thyself mistaken is but to be the wiser. Why, never the wisest man but saw himself a fool a thousand times. Come, I have mistaken thee more than thou hast me; for, on my word, I thought thou hadst no heart at all—and that 's far worse than having one which has but gone astray. Come, Neighbor Attwood, sit thee up and eat with us."

"Nay, I 'll go home," said the tanner, turning his face away that they might not see his tears. "I be a spoil-sport and a mar-feast here."

"Why, by Jupiter, man!" cried Master Jonson, bringing his fist down upon the board with a thump that made the spoons all clink, "thou art the very merry-maker of the feast. A full heart 's better than a surfeit any day. Don't let him go, Will—this sort of thing doth make the whole world kin! Come, Master Attwood, sit thee down, and make thyself at home. 'T is not my house, but 't is my friend's, and so 't is all the same in the Lowlands. Be free of us and welcome."

"I thank ye, sirs," said the tanner, slowly, turning to the table with rough dignity. "Ye ha' been good to my boy. I 'll ne'er forget ye while I live. Oh, sirs, there be kind hearts in the world that I had na dreamed of. But, masters, I ha' said my say, and know na more. Your pleasure wunnot be my pleasure, sirs, for I be only a common man. I will go home to my wife. There be things to say before my boy comes home; and I ha' muckle need to tell her that I love her—I ha' na done so these many years."

"Why, Neighbor Tanner," cried Master Jonson, with flushing cheeks, "thou art a right good fellow! And here was I, no later than this morning, red-hot to spit thee upon my bilbo like a Michaelmas goose!" He laughed a boyish laugh that did one's heart good to hear.

"Ay," said Master Shakspere, smiling, as he and Simon Attwood looked into each other's eyes. "Come, neighbor, I know thou art my man—so do not go until thou drinkest one good toast with us, for we are all good friends and true from this day forth. Come, Ben, a toast to fit the cue."

"Why, then," replied Master Jonson, in a good round voice, rising in his place, "*here 's to all kind hearts!*"

"Wherever they may be!" said Master Shakspere, softly. "It is a good toast, and we will all drink it together."

And so they did. And Simon Attwood went away with a warmth and a tingling in his heart he had never known before.

"Margaret," said he, coming quickly in at the door, as she went silently about the house with a heavy heart preparing the supper, "Margaret."

She dropped the platter upon the board, and came to him hurriedly, fearing evil tidings.

He took her by the hands. This, even more than his unusual manner, alarmed her. "Why, Simon," she cried, "what is it? What has come over thee?"

"Nought," he replied, looking down at her, his hard face quivering; "but I love thee, Margaret."

"Simon, what dost thou mean?" faltered Mistress Attwood, her heart going down like lead.

"Nought, sweetheart—but that I love thee, Margaret, and that our lad is coming home!"

Her heart seemed to stop beating.

"Margaret," said he, huskily, "I do love thee, lass. Is it too late to tell thee so?"

"Nay, Simon," answered his wife, simply, "'t is never too late to mend." And with that she laughed—but in the middle of her laughing a tear ran down her cheek.

FROM the windows of the New Place there came a great sound of men singing together, and this was the quaint old song they sang:

"Then here 's a health to all kind hearts
Wherever they may be;
For kindly hearts make but one kin
Of all humanity.

And here 's a rouse to all kind hearts
Wherever they be found;
For it is the throb of kindred hearts
Doth make the world go round!"

"Why, Will," said Master Burbage, slowly setting down his glass, "'t is altogether a midsummer night's dream."

"So it is, Dick," answered Master Shakspere, with a smile, and a far-away look in his eyes. "Come, Nicholas, wilt thou not sing for us just the last few little lines of 'When Thou Wakest,' out of the play?"

Then Nick stood up quietly, for they all were his good friends there, and Master Drayton held his hand while he sang:

"Every man shall take his own,
In your waking shall be shown:
Jack shall have Jill,
Nought shall go ill,
The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well!"

They were very still for a little while after he had done, and the setting sun shone in at the windows across the table. Then Master Shakspere said gently, "It is a good place to end."

"Ay," said Master Jonson, "it is."

So they all got up softly and went out into the garden, where there were seats under the trees among the rose-bushes, and talked quietly among themselves, saying not much, yet meaning a great deal.

But Nick and Cicely said "Good-night, sirs," to them all, and bowed; and Master Shakspere himself let them out at the gate, the others shaking Nick by the hand with many kind wishes, and throwing kisses to Cicely until they went out of sight around the chapel corner.

When the children came to the garden-gate in front of Nick's father's house, the red roses still twined in Cicely's hair, Simon Attwood and his wife Margaret were sitting together upon the old oaken settle by the door, looking out into the sunset. And when they saw the children coming, they arose and came through the garden to meet them, Nick's mother with outstretched hands, and her face bright with the glory of the setting sun. And when she came to where he was, the whole of that long, bitter year was nothing any more to Nick.

For then—ah, then—a lad and his mother; a son come home, the wandering ended, and the sorrow done!

She took him to her breast as though he were a baby still; her tears ran down upon his face, yet she was smiling—a smile like which there is no other in all the world: a mother's smile upon her only son, who was astray, but has come home again.

Oh, the love of a lad for his mother, the love of a mother for her son—unchanged, unchanging, for right, for wrong, through grief and shame, in joy, in peace, in absence, in sickness, and in the shadow of death! Oh, mother-love, beyond all understanding, so holy that words but make it common!

"My boy!" was all she said; and then, "My boy—my little boy!"

And after a while, "Mother," said he, and took her face between his strong young hands, and looked into her happy eyes, "mother dear, I ha' been to London town; I ha' been to the palace, and I ha' seen the Queen; but, mother," he said, with a little tremble in his voice, for all he smiled so bravely, "I ha' never seen the place where I would rather be than just where thou art, mother dear!"

The soft gray twilight gathered in the little garden; far-off voices drifted faintly from the town. The day was done. Cool and still, and filled with gentle peace, the starlit night came down from the dewy hills; and Cicely lay fast asleep in Simon Attwood's arms.